

## Free library services?

The presentation of the Redmond Barry Award to Mr Gough Whitlam at the National Library on 22 July was an occasion at which I was privileged to be present and one that should have been of great pride to all ALIA members.

Members who have been in the Association for as long as I have, will recall the opening address by Mr Whitlam at the 1974

LAA Melbourne Conference where he said: 'The library's function is to provide information. The librarian's function is to organise that information and ensure that everyone has access to it. These functions are basic to any concept of true democracy. Libraries that are free, open and accessible are just as much bastions of freedom as universities or parliaments.'

The conferring of the Redmond Barry Award made much of Mr Whitlam's commitment to access to information. However, did anyone in the official party admit to Mr Whitlam that on that very day, General Council had voted to forgo our Association's proud record of standing firm on matters of principle and philosophy and commitment to the basis of our profession — free public library services — to opt for the purely convenient notion of core information services?

I for one was ashamed of our

double standard on that day. If we are prepared to alter our statement on free library services to all, what chance do we have in the fight for public access to networked information?

I for one, will not be using the new statement, which encourages elected members to give the narrowest meaning to core information services.

*Kay Poustie, WA*

When I took the chair for my first meeting as president of the Association in March 1993 I pointed out to the members of General Council that individually and collectively it is accountable to the members of the Association but responsible to the Australian public, because in one way or another decisions of General Council impact on libraries and users of libraries.

By its regrettable decision to add to its statement on free library services to all a second statement that allows the creation of an information underclass among public library users, it would appear that my admonition was not taken to heart. I use the word 'add' advisedly. In the unseemly euphoria that followed the vote, proponents of the change neglected to rescind the statement they were seeking to replace.

General Council ignored its accountability to the Association's membership by adopting a statement rewritten as part of the voting process, and which therefore had not been circulated to the membership. It ignored its responsibility to the users of libraries by adopting it at all.

## Revised statement on free library services to all

*Over the past two years General Council, in conjunction with ALIA's Divisions has been reviewing the Association's policy statement on free library services to all. General Council decided at its July 1994 meeting to amend this policy statement. The amended statement reads:*

- 1. The Australian Library and Information Association asserts that each member of the Australian community has an equal right to access to public library and information services regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, social or economic status.*
- 2. Such freedom of access is essential to the democratic process and to the social well being of the Australian community. The satisfaction of a person's information needs must be independent of an ability to pay.*
- 3. Libraries and information services established to service the general public should, therefore, provide core services to all members of the library's clientele without direct charge to the individual.*

A selection of letters addressing General Council's decision follow...

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### ...Free library services? (continued)

Unfortunately, few if any librarians will feel the full impact of the General Council decision because most will continue to satisfy their own information and service needs as a hidden perk of their jobs. Some may imagine that they will benefit personally by meeting the perceived needs of a few politicians.

But charging small amounts for some services will do nothing to demonstrate business acumen, though it may well demonstrate lack of vision, compassion and imagination.

We should not be trying to make our libraries seem less costly, rather we should be ensuring that they are seen to be more important. It is preferable to demonstrate that libraries are not a cost centre but an investment, the return on which can be quantified in a number of ways. The methodology is not difficult, and everybody benefits.

*Jennifer Cram,  
Immediate Past President*

At its last meeting General Council voted six to five, with one abstention, to alter its statement on free library services to all to '...provide core information services to all members of the library's community without direct charge to the individual'. I was one of the General Councillors who voted against this resolution.

My dismay that the Association has moved from a position of principle to that of economic expediency was further heightened when at the presentation of the Redmond Barry Award to Mr Gough Whitlam that evening, we heard how Mr Whitlam supported the free, open and accessible provision of information to the Australian community through its libraries. None of us had the courage to let Mr Whitlam know that things had changed.

At the conclusion of the General Council meeting on 26 March, I stated: 'I wish to register my disappointment as a General Councillor, particularly in view of the Association's citation to Mr Whitlam for the Redmond Barry Award and his return

comments, plus the speech made by Mr Mark Latham at the following dinner and his support for free public libraries, with respect to General Council's passing of the amended version of its free library services to all statement.'

I trust this comment will be recorded in the General Council minutes of this meeting.

*Kerry Smith,  
WA General Councillor*

So General Council has voted by six to five, with the president abstaining, to include 'core' and 'value added' in its key policy on free library services.

It is curious that those six members of Council could endorse a notion, the definition of which in a library and information services context — as ACLIS has found — is elusive. Perhaps they could enlighten *inCite* readers about the definition of 'core' and 'value added' they had in mind when they voted.

Or perhaps on reflection these six members will recognise that a qualified commitment to free libraries is no commitment at all.

Free public library service is not generally under threat in Australia. What a pity, therefore, that the Association tampers with its policy when the real need is for it and ACLIS to launch a sustained campaign of advocacy to ensure that all Australians at the end of Australia's first 100 years have equal access to better libraries, regardless of their circumstances.

That is the message that needs to be conveyed to Haddon Storey, together with advice that the notion of 'core' and 'value added' is just that — a notion, incapable of consistent and durable definition, and one which he and our Association should forget.

*Alan Bundy, SA*

Alan Bundy has provided me with a copy of his letter of 26 July regarding the General Council decision on the free library services statement.

While making the curiously qualified statement, 'free public library service is not generally under threat in Australia', Alan then criticises General Council for

not dealing in absolutes.

The ALIA statement as agreed upon does not in any way preclude a sustained campaign of advocacy to ensure everyone has equal access to better libraries. What it does do is give everyone an open-ended winnable baseline in terms of core services.

History is plentiful in people who got nowhere by standing dogmatically on principles. It is also full of people who combined pragmatism and principles to achieve workable, beneficial outcomes.

I know which camp I'd rather be in.

*Jan Gaebler,  
ALIA Vice-president*

As an observer to six of the past nine meetings of General Council, I am pleased to see the Council has at last passed the amendment to the free library services statement. The Association now has a statement that reflects the reality of the situation. Congratulations to all concerned for having the courage to show that librarians are not a group of wishful thinkers and who recognise the importance of a statement that can be used and applied without hypocrisy.

*Trevor Wakely, Vic*

Thank you, General Council, for providing the Association and its members with a pragmatic and defensible statement on public library access.

From one who has been immediately in the firing line, defending the public's right to free core services, I now feel I have a strong and ideologically sound statement to give to politicians, bureaucrats and journalists.

On behalf of the Victorian Branch Council, I express our sincere thanks for what was, I am sure, a difficult revision.

*Sue McKnight,  
President, Vic Branch*

Congratulations on General Council's recognition of 'core' services. Finally the 'user pays' issue is resolved!

We have had a core (or basic) and value added services policy in Victoria for several years now.

## ...Free library services? (continued)

The Government's conditions of funding of public libraries are based upon it.

The policy has not endangered free library service. Indeed, as the recent inCite report made clear, in the current year we have had the strongest statements ever in defence of 'free' public library service.

In Hansard, the Premier has stated his commitment and Minister for Local Government, Roger Hallam, has made the same commitment in a media release. My own Minister, Haddon Storey, has sent a letter to all Victorian public libraries containing the firmest possible reassurances on 'free' library service.

I trust that your General Councillors who did not vote to support the new ALIA policy on the issue will be reassured by our experience in Victoria.

*Ross Gibbs, Vic*

## Information poverty

Thank you to Eric Wainwright for a very informative overview of the issues of public access to networked information in Front Line (24 June 1994). I heartily agree that the policy of universal service should be extended to access to digital data networks.

I am completing a three-year project that has examined the information, communication and telecommunications needs of 202 older adults, aged 60 and over. The research is funded by the Telecom Fund for Social and Policy Research.

I found the respondents generally to be very active information seekers. Mostly they made extensive use of the media, as well as interpersonal and institutional sources, to keep themselves informed for their everyday lives. Libraries came out well, as future publications will show.

The problem for this age group is that most do not have computers and are resistant to the idea of acquiring or using one. Only 28 respondents (13.9 per cent) had a computer at home or work, although few were still working. Only three respondents were considering purchasing one.

Only four respondents had modems and only 36 (17.8 per cent) had even the vaguest notion of what a modem is.

Although the data collection period was June 1992 to January 1994, I do not think the situation has changed.

I believe that, in discussions of information poverty, there has been a tendency to confuse content and machines for transmitting content and misleadingly to equate information poverty with ownership and use of machines.

Nevertheless, it is easy to see

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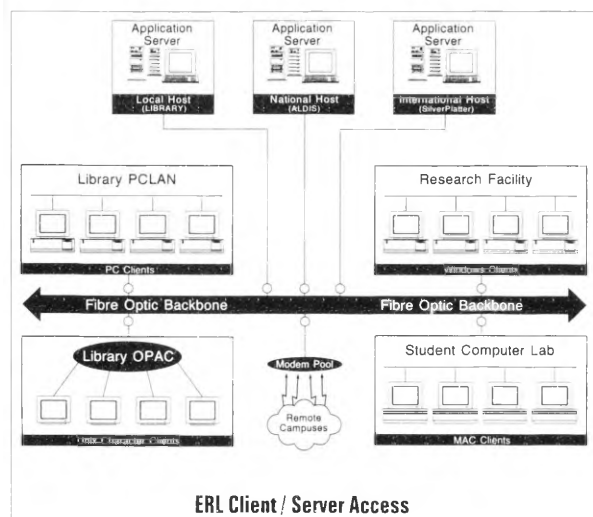
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► how the spread of networked information could disadvantage groups such as older adults.

I think it is essential that community information continues to be available in a range of different forms.

I have seen some extravagant claims for the proposed Melbourne FreeNet, including the suggestion that people associated with the present information dissemination systems could be re-trained, for example, to maintain on-line databases, rather than print brochures!

Public libraries are in a good position to ameliorate some of the effects of the spread of networked information on vulnerable groups. I urge you not to lose sight of the needs of such groups.

*Kirsty Williamson, Vic*

### Taking issue

I regret having to take issue with Jean Bailey (*inCite*, 19 August), who is both a respected leader of library technicians and a valued colleague.

It is regrettable too that she finds some of the letters to *inCite* about library technicians and the Fellowship offensive but she should not underestimate the offence given to many professional members by the decision that library technicians are eligible for the Fellowship, until now the Association's highest professional award.

Ms Bailey wonders whether those who oppose awarding the Fellowship to library technicians were also against the acceptance of technicians as members of the Association. Some were.

I was Chairman of the Board of Education at the time and was an enthusiastic supporter of library technician membership. I was involved in securing General Council's approval for the creation of this separate membership category, though not the clumsy post-nominal ALIATech [sic], which came later.

Many older and wiser members counselled me against supporting library technician membership of ALIA as a separately identified group, warning that it would prove divisive and would downgrade the professional group. I dismissed these objections at the time but recent events show that I was wrong.

*Neil Radford, NSW*

### Future of Curtin

More than a few WA members of ALIA are seriously concerned about a draft 'discussion paper' out of Curtin University of Technology from the information services working party chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

The working party was created earlier this year just after the then Head of the School of Information and Library Studies, Professor P Layzell-Ward, departed to take up the position of Head of the College of Librarianship in, Abersytwyth, Wales, UK.

Drawing on mostly anecdotal evidence, and selectively quoting journal articles (mostly rationalisations of library school closures in the United States), the working party has recommended that 'Curtin should withdraw from provision of undergraduate and graduate specialist programs in librarianship, archives and records management'.

In its place, the working party suggests introducing 'an interdisciplinary information resource management program at the masters level.' This proposed qualification aims to 'equip graduates to be hybrid managers with broad skills in their profession'. The report is liberally sprinkled with phrases like 'strategic roles', 'strategic alliances', 'leading-edge curriculum' and 'broad strategic routes'.

Notwithstanding the report's reliance on hyperbole, the bottom line for Western Australia is that, should the working party's recommendations be implemented,

there will be no opportunities in Perth for school leavers to undertake an undergraduate qualification in librarianship other than teacher librarianship or to undertake a graduate diploma, arguably the most popular method of gaining a professional librarian qualification in Australia.

What is just as disturbing is that the report has come down with such serious recommendations, when the level of investigation, the depth of research and the analysis of data is so manifestly superficial that if it were an undergraduate research report, it would be sent back for reworking.

Furthermore, two of the State's senior librarians are signatories to the report — a matter that should concern the Australian Library and Information Association's Board of Education and ALIA members generally.

Of course, everyone is entitled to his or her views on education and training but to emasculate what has been the main provider of library graduates in Perth seems an odd way of working with the profession.

A cynic may suggest there is a hidden agenda being followed in this scenario, where the movement or relocation of FTE staff are destined for another location at the expense of library education in Western Australia.

No one would deny that academic departments in any institution should be beyond review or reorganisation. But are the recommendations of this report a case of the proverbial baby being thrown out with the bathwater?

*Roy Stall, WA*

### Note from the Executive Director

*General Council and the Board of Education have both discussed the matter of library closures. At its last meeting General Council noted, with regret, the closure of the course at the University of Tasmania. The position at Curtin will continue to be monitored and the Association has offered its views on the issue raised in the discussion paper.* ■