

Responding to change



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Libraries in the TAFE sector have always faced unique challenges, particularly in relation to two critical factors: an extremely diverse customer base and the range and variety of TAFE's educational programs. These continue to be key factors in shaping the development of services offered by TAFE libraries in all states and territories.

Since TAFE draws its students from a wide range of education and social backgrounds, services need to be extremely flexible and responsible. For example, the needs of students with poor literacy and numeracy skills must be met along with those of university graduates returning to TAFE to supplement their university training.

The scope and diversity of TAFE curricula give TAFE libraries many of their distinguishing features. Library collections, for example, provide access to trade and technical literature not available in other libraries. In fact the specialist collections of many TAFE libraries represent a significant contribution to the overall Distributed National Collection. TAFE libraries are also characterised by the range of media forms collected, with particular emphasis on audio visual and multi-media resources.

The reform agenda

'An abundance of reform' is the apt title of Robin Ryan's recent article published in *Training Agenda*. Many teachers, employers, students, administrators and librarians in TAFE would readily concur with this description of the sector. The past decade and a half has been characterised by relentless policy reform following the establishment of the new training system agreed to by all states and territories in 1992. The list of reforms is lengthy and includes modularisation of curricula, a focus on national standards, competency based training, and the introduction of the competitive training market involving tendering for government funds by both public and private providers.

More recently, 'training packages' have been announced to replace national curriculum as the basis of vocational education and training provision. These comprise competency standards, assessment guidelines and nomination of qualification levels. MAATs, the Modern Australian Apprenticeship and Traineeship System, the centrepiece of the Commonwealth government's policy for vocational education and training, is another recent and highly significant development which will challenge TAFE's traditional role in this area.

Apart from this reform agenda TAFE has been affected by the many other technological and societal changes which characterise Australia today. These include the globalisa-

tion of education, the converging of computing and telecommunications and an emphasis on quality and customer service.

Impact on libraries

So what then has been the impact on TAFE libraries? Far-reaching and ongoing would have to be the answer.

Certainly, the recent changes flowing from the reform agenda have provided new challenges to TAFE librarians and many of the articles in this issue describe some of these responses. For example the recent growth in flexible learning methodologies has meant that TAFE libraries are adjusting their services to meet the needs of remote, work-based and/or independent learners. As a result new services have been developed including postal/fax and electronic delivery services and the establishment of (Open) learning centres within or in proximity to libraries. Librarians are now often undertaking new responsibilities in the management of educational technology services such as video-conferencing, satellite broadcasts and adaptive technologies. In some cases they are undertaking Web management and other roles related to the exploitation of Internet capabilities.

Paralleling the increasing emphasis in TAFE on communication and information competencies, TAFE libraries are taking an active role in the development of information literacy skills in students and in many cases are working in close partnership with teaching staff to ensure that these skills are learnt within the context of the curriculum. Increasingly many TAFE librarians are taking on the role of Internet training within their own Institutes as are their university and school librarian colleagues, so the teaching and training role of librarians in TAFE is increasing significantly.

Many TAFE libraries are also developing fee for service arrangements, for example for the provision of library services to private providers.

Partnerships and collaboration

Alongside the introduction of competition policy there has also been an increased emphasis on collaboration and partnership between TAFE and other educational providers, a theme which will be explored in some depth in the ALIA national TAFE conference in August this year. For instance, formal articulation agreements have been developed with a number of universities to enable TAFE graduates to gain credit towards university programs of study and various joint school/TAFE programs are in place in all states and territories. Many library partnerships have been developed to support these arrangements. These include reciprocal borrowing

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schemes such as CAVAL in Victoria and the numerous reciprocal arrangements in place between the TAFE NSW Library Network and a number of universities.

There are also many examples of joint use libraries such as Tea Tree Gully in South Australia (public library and TAFE) and Nirimba in Western Sydney (School, TAFE and university). Formal arrangements have also been developed in some states between TAFE and the Adult and Community Education sector.

There are also strong co-operative links between TAFE libraries themselves, both within and beyond state boundaries, often strengthened by formal network structures such as the LEARN network in South Australia, VATCL in Victoria and The TAFE New South Wales Library Network. The virtual dismantling of central support/head office units for libraries in all states and territories and the philosophy of devolution has sharpened the need for networking and has prompted development of alternative mechanisms to share expertise and to support the research and development of TAFE library services. This is especially important

due to the large number of small TAFE libraries and the need to address the potential dangers of isolation.

Quality and customer service

Within this environment of change and challenge there are numerous examples of innovation and quality management in the TAFE library sector. Recent examples of achievement in this area are the Quality Awards won by RMIT TAFE library (see p12, this issue) and Northern Sydney Institute Library. Such awards are a recognition of the commitment to customer service 'quality processes' which characterise many libraries in a sector which is in some respects 'the quiet achiever'.

This issue of *inCite* provides an important opportunity to explore the distinctive character of library and information work in this sector at a time of major change and challenge. The National TAFE Conference scheduled for 25-26 August in Sydney, with the theme *Partnerships in Learning — the creative strategy* will also be an important forum for discussion and debate on many of the current and future issues facing TAFE libraries, but also of significance to many other library and information service agencies in this country. ■

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James Bennett

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