

Capitalising on conferences...



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ALIA Board of Directors

It seems hard to imagine, but by the time this issue of *inCite* hits the streets, the Olympic Games will be over. The athletes will have returned home. Life in Sydney will be returning to normal and ALIA2000 in Canberra will be the focus of attention for many of us. I am actually writing this column from the unusual vantage point of being between two conferences, both of which are highly relevant to library and information services. Last month I participated in ISIC 2000 in Sweden and next month I will be participating in ALIA2000.

ISIC is an acronym for Information Seeking in Context. The first ISIC Conference took place in Tampere, Finland in 1996 and the conference has been held biennially since. Attracting researchers from around the world, ISIC has established itself as a sibling to the information retrieval research conference, SIG IR, hosted by the ACM. In addition to the ISIC conference itself, a key component of ISIC is a doctoral workshop. About twenty-five research degree students have an opportunity to discuss their research projects and the issues and challenges that they are facing in small groups led by leading researchers. The list of group leaders resembles a roll-call of information behaviour researchers and writers and includes Carol Kuhlthau, Pertti Vakkari, Brenda Dervin, Tom Wilson, Elfreda Chatman, Reijo Savolainen, Amanda Spink and David Ellis. Registration for the doctoral workshop extends also to the ISIC conference and so the students are able to extend their networks in the international research community. Each ISIC conference has attracted delegates from Australia and there have been Australians included among the presenters, group leaders, session chairs and program committee members. ISIC 2002 and the doctoral workshop are likely to be held again in Europe in mid-August and ALIA members and their colleagues might want to consider attending.

By contrast, the biennial conference of ALIA is a conference for information service workers and students of the library and information profession. Addressing the theme *Capitalising on Knowledge: the Information Profession in the 21st Century*, ALIA2000 addresses not only issues of professional practice but also the broad environment which shapes and is shaped by information services. Speakers at ALIA2000 include practitioners from a wide range of sectors in the information industry in Australia and overseas as well as politicians, government bureaucrats, authors, consultants, lawyers and editors. One key feature of ALIA2000 is the trade exhibition supported by more than fifty companies and organisations whose products and services are sought by practitioners. Two other key features are special interest sessions and tours of libraries in Canberra.

These are the features that you would expect to find at a professional conference along with a program that allows delegates to take advantage of opportunities to keep up with developments in technology, service delivery and advocacy.

The juxtaposition of these two conferences — one of primary interest to researchers, the other to practitioners — raises a number of questions. How can we ensure that the outcomes of information-seeking research are applied appropriately in information practice? How can we ensure that the outcomes of research carried out in information practice inform the ongoing development of theory in information seeking? Similar questions arise also in relation to information retrieval research and information practice. On this point, a call was made at ISIC 1998 for more interactions between the research communities in information seeking and information retrieval. Although there are some signs that the call has been heeded it seems to me that practice-based problems could well provide an impetus for research that draws on both information seeking and retrieval. If this is the case, then what might be an appropriate role for ALIA? An ALIA Board of Education forum [see p31] before the conference will explore the links between research and practice and might begin to answer these questions.

Conferences represent a significant investment in our professional development. There are a number of ways of ensuring that there is a return on that investment to us as individuals and to our employers. These include:

- participating in conferences with some clear objectives in mind;
- identifying in advance the papers to hear and organising with friends and colleagues to 'cover' parallel sessions;
- reflecting on the experience of a conference and reporting back to work colleagues, especially those ideas that might improve service delivery and performance;
- considering the possibility of sharing innovations in practice with others through the presentation of a paper or a workshop at a future conference; and
- expanding professional networks through the trade exhibits and social functions.

I came away from ISIC 2000 impressed with the quality of the research projects discussed and enthused about the scope and methodologies of information-seeking research. I expect to come away from ALIA2000 with a keen sense of our profession's imaginative responses to the challenges of capitalising on knowledge. I am confident that you will too. ■

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