

Aotearoa, as at least Kiwis reading this will know, is Maori for the 'land of the long white cloud'. It is also an integral part of the title of what was the New Zealand Library Association, and is now LIANZA, the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa.

From 19–21 September, as the guest of the LIANZA president Spencer Lilley — a reciprocal arrangement between LIANZA and ALIA — I had the pleasure of attending the annual LIANZA conference in a city twice voted the most beautiful city of Aotearoa, Rotorua (Roto = lake, rua = two).

It was a stimulating experience, not least to see Maori and Pakeha reconciliation in action, and shared national pride in the living language and culture of the Maori who now represent sixteen per cent of the population and rising. That is one lesson for Australia.

At a professional level, four lessons stood out:

The value of having an annual whole-of-profession conference rather than a biennial conference. Interestingly the LIANZA AGM did have an extended debate on a motion to move to a biennial conference. This was comprehensively lost. The issue of library conferences — when, where, how many, what focus — is thus not unique to Australia. It was examined at the first ALIA national policy congress, and will need to continue to be reviewed, one significant issue being increasing concern from library suppliers about the number of Australian conferences to which they are having to contribute large amounts of money and staff time.

If I had contributed to the debate at the LIANZA AGM I would have counselled against moving to a biennial conference, my inclination being for an annual ALIA conference with plenary sessions for professional connection and inspiration followed by specialist streams. The current ALIA conference pattern is not conducive to connecting the silos within our broad professional church. Agree? Disagree? Let *inCite* know.

The second lesson from Aotearoa is how fortunate public libraries in Australia have been — apart from the Victorian, world's only (and failed), attempt to apply compulsory competitive tendering to them — not to become mired in the economic rationalist drive to specify private and public good outcomes of investment in them. In his 1956 book *The chance to read: public libraries in the world today* British public librarian Lionel McCoolvin identified the four top public library nations as the United States, United Kingdom, Denmark ... and New Zealand. Australia, deservedly, did not rate, although it would now be in the top ten, alongside New Zealand. However many public libraries in New Zealand have been sullied by a requirement to generate from five to fifteen per cent of their funding from direct user charges, on the quite contrived basis of so called 'core' and 'value added private benefit' services and resources — effectively freezing in time 'core' public library provision. Shortsighted, and a guarantee of social exclusion. Although its rural libraries have the same problems

of inadequate resourcing and a lack of professional staffing as those in Australia, there are many fine and enterprising public libraries in New Zealand, Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington City Libraries among them. Auckland, for example, has developed the fast growing concept of Homework and Learning Centres beyond, I suspect, anything in Australia. Check out AKOZONE at <http://www.akcity.govt.nz/library/kids/kids.html>.

As if to emphasise that New Zealand libraries remain committed to co-operation, sharing and the public good, the Horowenua Library Trust is making freely available KOHA, the world's first open source library management system. It is already used in Australia, the United States, Estonia and Poland. KOHA is Maori for a gift, and a useful one it is too — find it at <http://www.koha.org>.

The third professional lesson is that the dynamic and status of the library profession in New Zealand seems not to be lessened by the fact that LIANZA is not in the course recognition business. However New Zealand, with just two library educational providers, the Victoria University of Wellington and the Open Polytechnic, does have less educational complexities than Australia.

The final professional lesson from our colleagues in Aotearoa is the value of developing a National Information Strategy — a LIANZA initiative commenced in 1999 which has boosted LIANZA's membership and the profession's profile. More importantly it has brought together a whole range of government departments and agencies in the context of lifelong learning, developing information literate citizens, closing the digital divide, restoring trust in government and growing an innovative economy.

The New Zealand strategy has three core principles:

- knowledge equity (competencies);
- knowledge resources (context); and
- knowledge access (infrastructure).

The cynic might point out that the issue of an Australian national information policy has been a lost or drifting cause for well over a decade — it was on the agenda when I was president in 1988. Is it a cause, an issue, whose time has at last come? The need for an information-enabled Australia suggests that it has. It is implicit in a number of the federal government's policies and actions and is specified in the federal opposition's knowledge nation statement.

Regardless of the outcome of the federal election, should ALIA lead by convening a first national information strategy summit, using the hard won experience, lessons learned and knowledge of our New Zealand colleagues? It would mean raising advocacy to a whole new level of proaction — but surely better that we do so than those with narrow values, limited insights and technology dominated perspectives. Agree? Disagree? Let *inCite* know.

Haere ra. ■



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