

Capturing the diversity of the profession



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I am writing this column between two significant ALIA gatherings, one in Brisbane and the other in Sydney. Together these two gatherings capture the diversity and richness of the library and information profession and of ALIA.

The most striking feature of the Brisbane gathering, the New Librarians Symposium, was the sheer energy of the two hundred or so people who met to discuss and chart their futures as library and information professionals. From the title of the event to the backgrounds of speakers, from the layout of the plenary session room to the structure of sessions the focus was on participation and action. I was invited as ALIA president to join a group of other more experienced members of the profession at the 'Big Wigs' cocktail party. Again participation and action were the features as people engaged busily in conversations, partly to win a competition that required people to form a Dewey group, partly to follow up the activities of the day by networking and partly to enjoy the company of the people attracted to the Symposium. I left the gathering feeling confident that the library and information profession has a very sound future but I was also challenged by the impact of these talented people on the profession and their workplaces as well as on our Association. It is very clear that we must develop processes and mechanisms for providing a voice for new professionals in ALIA at all levels: the development of the New Generation Advisory Group is only a start. The formation of the Group must be complemented by CPD programs, research opportunities, rewards and incentives that are relevant to these people who represent the future of the profession. ALIA committees and working groups must continue to consult widely and ensure that the interests of all members are reflected in their outcomes and the Board of Directors must remain mindful of its planning and decision making horizons. In my view, all members of ALIA, not only the 'big wigs' invited to cocktail parties, have responsibilities for mentoring new professionals and suggesting options when their advice is sought.

The gathering in Sydney is *Information Online 2003*, convened by the Information Specialists Group of ALIA and its forerunners. The eleventh event of its kind, it is described by its convenors as the 'premier conference and exhibition for the online information industry in the Asia-Pacific region'. *Information Online 2003* has attracted keynote speakers who are leaders in the industry in Australia and overseas. It has also attracted sponsors representing global, international and Australian corporations and exhibitors that provide online products and services. More than a thousand delegates are expected to participate in *Information Online 2003*. Clearly this is a must-attend for library

and information professionals eager to add value to their clients and organisations through information.

As ALIA president I have been invited to open *Information Online 2003*, participate in a panel discussion of the role of the information professional, and attend a breakfast with super searchers and the conference dinner. Although this event has not yet occurred, I am confident that it will be very successful. Participants will be provoked and energised by the ideas they have explored and exchanged and they will return to their workplaces planning for the development, trialling and implementation of approaches, processes, products and services they have seen. The Information Specialists Group under the leadership of Elizabeth Swan has a well-earned reputation and track record for convening conferences that are highly regarded by those able to attend.

As well as these two ALIA gatherings that are focussed directly on library and information professionals and matters of information practice there are two other activities that I would like to report. In December and January your Association has been represented in discussions with partner organisations addressing issues in the broader environment that have an impact on information practice and are of particular concern to ALIA's institutional members. The discussions of the Regional Cultural Alliance, mentioned in December's Frontline, are taking shape with the launch of a proposed co-operation agreement scheduled for March. The Alliance brings together organisations such as Museums Australia, the Council of National Trusts, Regional Arts Australia, the Federation of Australian Historical Societies and ALIA to focus on the cultural development of regional Australia. This Alliance provides ALIA with an opportunity to conceptualise library and information services on a regional and geographic basis rather than on the more usual basis of library and information service types. This regional approach will identify possible new partnerships as well as provide an impetus for the strengthening of existing partnerships within regions. There is the real prospect of the walls of some of ALIA's own silos as well as the silos that have grown around different cultural institutions and organisations becoming more permeable as regions explore, document and regenerate their own distinctive cultures in their diverse forms.

The Australian Coalition for Cultural Diversity (ACCD) brings ALIA into partnerships with other organisations in the cultural sector. The Coalition is working towards ensuring the free flow of cultural expression not in this instance within Australia's regions but in the context of a free trade agreement between Australia and the United States. The Coalition asserts that 'Australian governments at all levels must be ▶

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► free to adopt policies that support the diversity of cultural expression and the viability of all those that produce and disseminate this expression' [Draft submission of the Australian Coalition for Cultural Diversity to the US FTA Task Force, Office of Trade Negotiations, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade]. International trade agreements must not constrain the right of each nation to sustain and develop its own cultures. The organisations that are parties to ACCD represent the professional associations in the cultural sector and include among others Arts Law Centre, Ausdance, Australian Publishers Association, Australian Society of Authors, Copyright Agency Ltd., Music Council of Australia, CREATE Australia and the Screen Producers Association of Australia. For ALIA, membership of the Coalition provides an opportunity to influence government policy and to shape the legislative environments in which institutions offer library and information services.

Although December–January is high summer in Australia the pace of activity for ALIA has not slowed. If the ALIA gatherings and partnerships that I have mentioned are any indication then 2003 looks like being an action packed year with the prospect of new partnerships emerging from shared interests and concerns. I hope that as a member of ALIA, you too have a rewarding year with the prospect of developing initiatives and programs for the people who rely on the services you offer and the value that you add to your workplaces. ■

Your voice

Unassailable ALIA...

Now that the NSW Pay Equity award claim is complete I would like to record a very big thanks to Phil Teece, Marie Murphy and ALIA for the support and expertise they gave us in our case. Travelling into the unknown as we were, it was the key issues of professionalism and the standards and principles that go with being part of a profession that became key evidence in the proceedings. ALIA as our professional body proved to be unassailable against opposition from the employers and within the union leadership as the arbiter of standards and qualifications.

What will be crucial over the next period will be what flows can be achieved in other sectors and how employers will try to wind back what we have won. I say this knowing that at the time of writing there is a clear push to 'punish' the organisations (that is, the library staff) covered by this award (except for the State Library of New South Wales) by forcing them to find the money for the new rates without additional funding from NSW Treasury. Perhaps it could be found from the savings made by paying us less for all these years! To some of my colleagues who have said that jobs will be lost as a result of the win I ask why is it

library workers have to accept second best — it's what I call the 'Mother has the burnt chop syndrome'.

For me, proof we were right has been the librarians and library technicians who have contacted me and the rest of the team to say that for the first time their take home pay is enough to live on, pay off debts and makes them feel recognised as making a valued contribution in the workplace — and that's what this case has been all about.

From here on in we should all be working towards a fair and equitable career path and pay structure across all sectors and to develop our own abilities to articulate our work and our value so that our contribution speaks for itself.

After six years and mountains of real and cyber documents it's been quite a ride!

Kate Burnham
(Chair now resigned) PSA
Library Industry Working Party

Your letters on any issue of relevance to the library and information sector are welcomed.

All letters should be addressed to the inCite editor and may be e-mailed to incite@alia.org.au, or faxed to 02 6282 2249, or posted to: Your voice, ALIA, PO Box E441, Kingston 2604. Please include your name and postal address with your letter or e-mail.

Letters will be accepted for publication until the 18th of the month.

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