

# Asserting **professional** standards

## Workwatch



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When I was appointed to my new post with ALIA in late 2006, I found that many friends and acquaintances had not heard of the Association or needed the explanation that it is the professional association for staff of Australian libraries. ALIA's role in asserting professional standards is an important aspect of the employment and human resources portfolio within the national office and throughout the Association.

In the last year there have been three occasions when Phil Teece or I have written to organisations in various parts of Australia which have advertised library posts suggesting that specialised qualifications in library and information studies were required and, in one case, that any training could be provided 'on the job'. The posts in question have ranged from library assistant in legal chambers to library management posts. In each instance, ALIA has taken the opportunity to highlight two important aspects of our role and of the profession as a whole.

First, ALIA represents more than 6000 individual library professionals and more than 800 institutional members that rely on the services of library staff at all levels, as do their clients. The Association and its members have a vital interest in promoting the highest quality standards in the library and information sector. For this reason, ALIA is the recognised authority for setting the educational standards and work-level guidelines applying throughout the library workforce. These are the same principles as are observed by any other profession, such as the law, engineering, medicine or nursing.

Second, any failure to recognise appropriate standards applying to library and information professionals has implications for assessment of work value within the sector. The fact that for decades the work of librarians, library technicians and archivists had not been accorded due professional status was a major factor considered in the Pay Equity Case Study of 1998 and the subsequent 2002 NSW Industrial Relations Commission equal remuneration case. These deliberations eventually brought remuneration levels of library staff into line with those of other professionals. The professional standing of the library workforce is still receiving consideration in state jurisdictions beyond NSW and in particular sectors, such as among health librarians, where the relationship between work value and remuneration remains an active issue.

ALIA does not dispute the need for further experience in a library and information setting to enhance any level of formal training. At the senior levels of the profession, ALIA has also recognised the necessity for library-based qualifications to be supplemented by

high level competencies in general administration, including the financial and human resource aspects. ALIA's perspective on these points is clear from both the 'Education' and 'Employment' sections of the Association's website, especially under the work-level guidelines. It remains true, however, that even wide experience in another field is no substitute for the specialised skills associated with any profession, especially when an appointee has to provide leadership to others in that profession.

## Why belong?

As membership of ALIA is not compulsory for those working in the library sector, the question is sometimes raised as to the benefits to be gained from joining.

There are considerable advantages to individuals and to the profession as a whole from having a sizeable and active membership. The obvious advantages are access to wider sources of information concerning the library profession, including working conditions, and contact with others working in the sector. Advocacy on matters affecting libraries and those who work in them is an important part of ALIA's role and cannot be performed effectively outside a recognised association. Indeed, two of the cases referred to above, where employers were seen to downplay the importance of appropriate qualifications, were brought to ALIA's attention by members who wanted the wider profession to take a stand.

As ALIA is not a union, there are limits as to representations that can be made on behalf of individual members who feel that they are not being treated fairly in the workplace or that something is amiss in the way in which a library organisation is run. There are, of course, unions who can and do represent library staff, as happened in the equal remuneration case in NSW and is currently happening in Western Australia. ALIA does nonetheless sometimes provide written support for members, for example, where a senior librarian was applying for study assistance to supplement library qualifications by completing an MBA.

One of the first requests I received from a member was for advice concerning a job application. While it may only be a matter of perception, I advised that reference in the application to membership of ALIA was important, as membership of a professional association does indicate genuine engagement with the profession. The recent increase in ALIA membership suggests that awareness of the various active roles played by the Association is growing, both within the library workforce and beyond.