

# Energise>>Enthuse>>Inspire

## The benefits of an exchange

Because of the nature of technology and information, it is becoming increasingly important for LIS professionals to be able to function in an international context as well as a national one. Whether you are a student like me or a working professional with an established career, I would highly recommend looking into the possibility of an exchange experience. It is an excellent way to open yourself up to new ideas and practices in the field. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Information Management at QUT and have just returned from a semester abroad in Sweden. There I studied at the country's main educational institution for librarians, the Swedish School of Library and Information Science (SSLIS) at the University of Borås, in western Sweden.



Carrie buying mittens in Stockholm

I was able to participate in the university's standard library and information courses as well as a specially designed practical experience course for foreign students. During this course I was exposed to a range of academic, public, and special libraries within Borås and surrounding areas, where I could speak with staff and listen to their experiences. For me this constituted a valuable opportunity not only to learn from the professionals with whom I spoke, but to go beyond what I could have seen as a visitor or even as a user of these services. Both the passion of staff for their profession, and the similarly high standards of Swedish and Australian library services were immediately evident to me; however it was the differences that I enjoyed seeing the most.

In terms of these differences, I would say that they appear not exactly in the nature of the services provided, but in the

extent to which these services are taken up. For example, it is common practice now for libraries to put in place avenues for users to suggest library materials and give feedback on collections. Swedish public libraries, however, also have a service called 'Demoteket', where users are invited to submit their own creative works to the lending collection (e.g. short stories, poems, novels, music CDs, videos, photo collections). In this way the user travels beyond the ability to influence a collection via mere suggestion – instead they can become a visible part of its development.

The innovative way in which Swedish libraries strive to meet user needs was evident not only in public libraries, but in special and academic libraries as well. One of the special libraries I visited was located in a private law firm. The librarians there had not only developed their own 'user-centric' classification system, but had devised a way to ensure that each worker had the easiest possible access to the most used and relevant items for their specific job. This involved 'decentralising' the collection and physically separating and placing materials at key locations throughout the entire building, closer to where users could access them.

In the same way that public libraries are coming to be seen as the main hub of community life, so too are university libraries being placed at the centre of student life. For example, the University of Borås Library is responsible not only for traditional library services such as providing study spaces and access to printed and electronic material, but it now houses once-external services such as the university's health, religious, social, and international student services. In this way libraries continue to focus on users as paramount – supporting them on personal, social, and educational levels within a variety of settings.

Regardless of whether these kinds of differences are something for our libraries to aspire to, the important thing is that they gave me the opportunity to view my future profession from a totally different perspective. Moreover I was lucky enough to develop a tolerance for Northern European weather, experience a Swedish Christmas, and acquire a taste for eating jam with savoury foods. Thankfully

I am just now beginning to overcome the temptation to take a fika (or coffee break) every few hours! I can also say that I have made some very dear friends, and have developed some Swedish language skills as well. In short, my experience continues to shape me both personally and professionally, just as I had hoped, and I encourage others to seek out similar opportunities within the LIS field and to make the most of them. If your organisation or institution doesn't offer an exchange then talk to the relevant people and see if you can set a precedent – I did, and it was definitely worth it. Exchange experiences are an ideal way to keep yourself and the profession responsive to new insights and changes, and to foster international collaboration and sharing of expertise.

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...gives a voice to the new generation of library and information professionals. If you have any suggestions or topics for this column, please contact the column co-ordinator Naomi Doessel, [naomidoessel@gmail.com](mailto:naomidoessel@gmail.com)



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