# Volunteering advice from the ALIA Retirees

At our recent Retirees committee meeting we shared stories about our experiences with volunteering, which may be of interest.

Several of us had gained paid employment as a result of volunteering in an organisation that interested us, so we recommend anyone looking for work to consider it, regardless of age. There is a need out there for people with interest and commitment. It certainly beats sitting at home waiting for opportunities to come along!

The ALIA Retirees group is an example of volunteers who give their time to maintain a connection with other ALIA members, who wish to keep in touch with the profession even though they are no longer formally involved. As a result we have made many new online friends and established a presence on the ALIA website and through our Retirees e-list. Most of us are also volunteering in other capacities too and finding it an enriching and rewarding experience.

Through e-lists I discovered that Ausdance WA needed help reorganising its small library collection and two of us have now become involved in a project that we believe will help an organisation doing good work with young people, but without funds to support a paid position. Ausdance ACT also needs assistance if anyone in Canberra is looking for a similar project. Its collection is already well set up, so it may need only occasional assistance.

It is important to realise that some organisations are unable to take volunteers because they cannot commit time to the supervision and training now required.

There are many ways to get involved, including checking the e-lists such as ALIA Volunteers e-list, assuming you wish to volunteer in a library-related field. There are organisations in each state which coordinate volunteers, but it may be more productive to target a particular organisation that interests you, demonstrating your enthusiasm in their aims.

Volunteering can enrich your life and lead to developing new friendships and interests.

Give it a go!

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*Editor's note: All of the e-lists to which Pat refers are available* ***http://www.alia.org.au/alianet/e-lists/***

# Adventures in volunteering – Beyond the Hype Symposium

I participated as a student volunteer at *Beyond the Hype 2008: Web 2.0*, an ALIA hosted symposium held at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in February 2008. This was a great experience that allowed me to see both sides of a professional event: the public face of a symposium and behind the scenes.

There were six student volunteers, drawn from various LIS courses around Australia. We participated in planning committee meetings and shared duties at the symposium. We also had plenty of time to attend sessions and chat with delegates during breaks.

Despite the good planning of the committee, there were some behind the scenes dramas, as at any such event. Computers crashed, workshop lists were mislaid, and weather interfered with catering plans, but organisers and volunteers pulled together, and no one even seemed to suspect that we were running around like headless chickens at times.

The symposium itself was very enjoyable and I was impressed by the enthusiasm of delegates and the level of interaction in discussion and workshops. The speakers that I saw all gave different perspectives on the role of Web 2.0 in libraries and provided much food for thought. Networking elements of the event were also embraced; there was lots of chatting over morning tea, lunch, and drinks, and I got to meet a great many interesting LIS professionals.

The great thing about volunteering, as a student, for an event like this is the opportunity to 'play with the grown-ups'. As a volunteer, you meet established members of the profession you are entering and see how they do things. You participate in something you may be asked to do yourself in the future. I greatly enjoyed this experience and found it very worthwhile.

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# Library students as volunteers – a mutually beneficial relationship

A major disaster at a Melbourne secondary school library led to the creation of a very successful volunteer program.

Between August 2002 and July 2006 I worked part-time as a library technician at a northern suburbs secondary school. I had been there less than a year when I received the news that our entire library catalogue / database had been accidentally deleted from the school intranet.

Upon investigation the computer technician discovered our automatic back-up system, which was meant to back up all files every night, hadn't been working for two years. We had lost two years' worth of data – hundreds of new catalogue records were gone and hundreds of withdrawn items were still on the system. We also had no way of telling which items were out on loan.

I was distraught. I couldn't bear the thought of having to do it all again on my own. In desperation I tried to think of other solutions. It was then that I remembered that several of the people I had graduated with from my librarianship qualification, seven years earlier, had found it difficult to get paid employment due to lack of experience. I realised there might be current library students or recent graduates who would appreciate the chance to gain real-life experience.

I contacted the Melbourne TAFE's and universities that taught library studies. I told them about my dilemma and asked if they could advertise for students and recent graduates to join our library as volunteers.

I was inundated with responses from unemployed recent graduates and current university and TAFE students. Initially I took on eight volunteers, two per day. I focused on teaching them how to download records off SCIS and re-catalogue as much as possible. I printed instructions and talked my volunteers through their first couple of attempts and then let them try it on their own. Most were working independently by their second shift.

By the end of that year, we had all the new records back on the system and had performed a stocktake to remove old records for withdrawn stock.

The volunteers' commitment varied. Some only stayed for six weeks, others ended up staying for over 18 months. I found that short-term commitments weren't beneficial to us so the following year I developed a set program covering the full range of school library tasks. I created a detailed instruction manual which was given to each volunteer on their first day. Volunteers had to commit to a minimum of 10 weeks with one four-hour shift per week. Each shift I would spend 30 minutes teaching them a new skill one-on-one and they would then have time to practicse it as well as skills they had learned previously.

I kept detailed records for each volunteer, noting what they did and how well they did it. This helped immensely when I was called on to act as a referee.

I was over the moon when my first volunteer got her first paid library position. It was her 'dream job' and I was called as her referee. It was the most in-depth referee interview I have ever encountered but I think I was just as excited as my volunteer was when they offered her the job the next day.

Throughout the program I supervised three TAFE work placement students, three Work for the Dole participants, and about 15 library students and recent graduates. Most of these volunteers ended up gaining paid employment in libraries after participating in our program. One job-shared my position for six months when I took up another short-term contract. Another gained my position when I left the school.

The program allowed us to not just fix the initial problem, but also begin a number of new projects which we would never have had the manpower to do before. This included adding additional subject headings and comments to items in our specialist collections and providing a more extensive reference service. It also freed up my time to begin running information literacy classes for our year 7 and 8 students. It was a win-win situation as our volunteers gained the real-life experience they needed and our library became a much better asset to the school community.

Now I work as a TAFE teacher continuing my work in developing students' skills to work in libraries. Although our course is very practical, our students still need real-life experience so I encourage other libraries to open their doors to volunteers as it truly is a mutually beneficial relationship.

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# Volunteering at Sia'atoutai Theological College Library – Tonga

In 2005 I spent six months volunteering in the Library of Sia'atoutai Theological College (STC) near the capital Nuku'alofa, Tongatapu, Kingdom of Tonga. This library holds the Kingdom's most significant collection of religious texts. My placement was through Uniting Mission's partner, the Free Wesleyan Church (FWC) of Tonga.

TAFE colleagues donated a set of Dewey, and the National Library of Australia gave temporary access to the National Database for any new additions. Well-founded advice was given not to set high expectations, but I did have many positive experiences.

I was soon in contact with the Tongan Library Association (TLA) when a delegation of New Zealand high school librarians came to distribute donated resources from their 'Adopt a Tongan Library' program. I also assisted with training workshops at the local campus of the University of the South Pacific. Prior to leaving I presented my experiences at STC Library to members of the TLA.

At STC, the card catalogue was the only collection access point beyond library staff personal knowledge. Staff, if religious ministers, could be sent away to fulfil pastoral duties for up to three years. Two of the four library staff were reallocated to other important duties within the campus during the year. It was difficult to train library staff who may lack interest, could be moved, or were selected within a week of my departure.

My main projects were to run workshops, make recommendations, and write reports. I documented procedures and left instructions for staff training on disc, USB, and printouts. I supervised the digitising of lists of Tongan, Pacific, and Thesis special collections held at STC. However, a more rewarding project was working with each faculty member to upgrade their computer skills (web, e-mail, Word, Excel).

Telecommunications and electricity supplies were haphazard, making computers and internet unpredictable and restricting access to student PCs. Tropical environments aren't kind to equipment and insects often set up home inside computer hardware! I was reliant on my laptop when confined to our house due to regular bouts of ill health.

Another project investigated an online library system. I discovered MUSAC (from NZ) had once been introduced but due to a lack of training or support, never implemented. After negotiation across four countries, I introduced part of the Library Management module. Library membership cards were produced for the first time, though barcodes hadn't arrived by the time I departed.

In September we celebrated the role of the library ("Laipeli") in the life of the college community, when library staff organised a Library Open Day. The entire campus participated in friendly team competitions – translating religious texts, trivia treasure hunt, composing and singing songs and poems. At my farewell function, these lovely library songs and poems were repeated.

During vacation breaks I toured other Tongan islands. On 'Eua – a two hour boat ride away – I visited the FWC High School Library. By coincidence I later met the NSW teachers and students on annual exchanges who organised resource donations. Without guidance, donated resources can often be far too advanced. Tongans treat books as precious, so wouldn't consider discarding useless materials, even if space is unavailable. Copies of texts from the NZ curriculum for Years 7–10 are desperately needed.

I also visited public libraries in Ha'apai and Vava'u and saw reliance on donations from Australia and NZ and low staffing and opening hours. Establishment of a public library in Nuku'alofa was my main recommendation to the TLA, as the largest island has no public library.

Sharing a small village house on campus with another female library staff member gave me unprecedented levels of inclusion into Tongan culture, unusual for "papalangi" (Europeans). At every event I was shown great generosity and hospitality, including attending feasts, funerals, graduations, a nine-day annual church conference, festivals, harvests, official events, presentations, and many other cultural events – all due to connections made at STC.

Volunteering isn't only about working. My time was balanced with social activities by joining the Tongan Women's International Social Club (TWISC). Joining another church group resulted in