

An exchange Q&A

Donna Priddle, a librarian with Mackay Regional Council public libraries in Australia, exchanged places with Graham Taylor, a government librarian with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in the UK. They have swapped jobs, houses, and cats for one year in 2009. Now half-way through their exchange Donna and Graham share with *inCite* their thoughts and feelings on their exchange experience so far.

1. What made you decide to try an exchange?

DONNA: Towards the end of May 2008, I had a sudden change in personal circumstances, (for the better, as it turns out). My daughter was half way through year 12, and so we started tossing around the idea of me taking 12 months leave of absence, and her taking a gap year before university. In June/July I started researching the numerous UK employment agencies that specialise in library and information science appointments, and came upon CILIP (<http://www.cilip.org.uk>). They house a database (LIBEX: <http://www.cilip.org.uk/jobscareers/libex/>) where people can register their interest in doing an exchange.

Although there appeared to be quite a prolific amount of jobs on the CILIP and other agency websites, I would most likely have had to do temporary work for the 12 month period. As I intended to have my daughter with me, an exchange offered more stability in both workplace and residence, enabling her to enrol in a local College here in Leeds.

GRAHAM: Ever since I spent a semester of my degree in France I had wanted to experience living abroad again. Many of my friends had taken a gap year after university and gone travelling, but I never seemed to be in the right position, and never had the funds. I decided that the only way I could realistically have my year out would be to get employment abroad. I had heard that a colleague of mine in the DWP (my employer in the UK) had done an exchange to New Zealand and planted the grain in my mind that this might be a solution to my itchy feet. Thus began my investigation into the idea of an exchange, and I discovered the LIBEX database. I mentioned the idea to my line manager, and she thought it would be good for my own professional development, but also for the library service, which would gain from my experiences in another country with a different employer.



Graham on Australia Day

2. How did you decide where to go?

DONNA: From contacts on the LIBEX database, I emailed about 8 people in various areas of the UK, who appeared to have positions that would be reasonably 'swappable' with my own. From a professional development perspective, this would have to be the most important criteria. You want to be able to learn new skills, of course, but I think it is also important, especially from our employers' points of view, that you and your exchangee are capable of 'stepping in' to a different role at least to cover the basics. Graham had public library and web-editing experience, so the essentials of my position at home were covered. I didn't have any Government library experience, but enough IT and cataloguing to muddle through until it all started to click. So I don't think either of us have been on a drain on host employers.

Therefore it was the job that drove the location for me, rather than the other way around. I'm very glad to be in Leeds I must say: less expensive than living in London and only two hours

train journey from Big Ben. Plus we have the beautiful Yorkshire Dales on our doorstep, and an international airport for travel further afield. What more does one need?

GRAHAM: I had a wonderful three week holiday in Australia in 2007 and really wanted to go back and see a bit more of this great country, so it was the obvious choice for an exchange. Being an English-speaking country was also an advantage. I had no preference where in Australia I'd like to live – I was keen on an adventure – so when Donna contacted me from Mackay in Queensland it seemed as good a place as any. I had not managed to get to Queensland during my previous holiday so it would be a good location to visit some parts of Australia I had not seen before.

As Donna says, the type of library job I would be going to had to be reasonably compatible with my current job so that I would learn relevant skills to take back home with me, but for it to be different enough to make the exchange worthwhile. Several aspects of the job in Mackay appealed to me: the development of computer training classes, being involved with the electronic databases, and maintenance of the library web site. These are all relevant to my role at the DWP so I would gain some valuable experience in these areas and see first-hand how another organisation manages these services.

3. Have you experienced any culture shock? Personally? Professionally?

DONNA: Culture shock has been fairly minimal I think. I've gone from living in a regional city that is more like a country town, to a very populated and busy centre (with a Starbucks on every other corner!) But I get out of town for a few hours every weekend and nourish my country-girl heart with wanders through the fields and forests. Have probably had more climate shock than anything else, but have learned how to 'rug-up' and the importance of a hat. Now we're in the UK summer, the sun doesn't actually set until 10.30pm or later! The snow in January was amazing though.



Donna in London

Professionally, I have actually been surprised in that I thought I would be completely overwhelmed at every turn. Turns out, UK Government libraries are much the same as us, facing similar challenges and issues, and trying desperately to get the whole world digitised! My greatest adjustment has probably been not dealing face-to-face with customers and the variety that comes along with that. I do believe I miss customers (even the slightly strange ones). But I'll be back to harass them again next year.

GRAHAM: Although the temperatures are much higher year-round than those in Leeds the days are so short! I really miss the lovely long summers evenings in the UK where it doesn't get dark until 10pm. Here it's dark at 5.30 in winter and 6.30 in summer.

I now understand that Australians do not all speak like Alf Stewart from *Home and Away*, which is a shame because I had been carefully perfecting my exclamation of 'You flaming galah!'

Professionally, I think the biggest culture difference is that Australian public libraries (or at least those in Mackay) seem

to be much better resourced and are held in higher regard than those in the UK, and their library buildings are well maintained and modern. Mackay Regional Council Libraries run a sleek, dynamic, customer-focused library service and I've been very impressed with the level of professionalism and commitment displayed here. The libraries here always come out top in any satisfaction survey of council services, and I can see why that is. My job at the DWP is purely desk-based – we have no face-to-face contact with our customers. I spend a lot of my working day cataloguing and working on the computer; any enquiries we get are dealt with via e-mail. Working here in a public library means being out on the floor with customers for a large portion of my day and this has been a challenge and also a joy! I hadn't realised how much I missed the dynamism of working with customers. Of course difficult situations always arise when dealing with the public but these are balanced out by the positive feedback you get from the majority of library customers.

4. What challenges have you faced?

DONNA:

- Navigating around Quarry House in Leeds where I'm based. It's HUGE, and there must be thousands of people working here. I still get lost if I take a wrong turn.
- Understanding that different methodologies and approaches to tasks are not necessarily inferior to my own. (I can sometimes be a bit of a 'bull at a gate').
- Encouraging colleagues to get enthusiastic about the expertise they possess and the services they do, and can provide. As in Australia, promotion of our profession is an area where we have to be constantly vigilant.
- Trying not to look like a twit when I can't understand what someone is saying due to the accent.
- Getting my head around the UK Public Service, which I don't imagine is that different to our own. The DWP is just one of many government departments and employs over 100 000 people!

GRAHAM: Before I arrived I didn't realise that my inability to drive would prove such a hurdle. Mackay is a small town in regional Queensland and does not have anything like the access to public transport that I enjoy in Leeds and the UK – and everyone drives here! Thankfully, Mackay does have an airport so I have been able to see other parts of the country, and I have been blessed with an obliging set of colleagues and friends who have been very kind in offering to take me to places that are only accessible by car, such as the beautiful hinterland of the Pioneer Valley near Mackay. My lack of personal transport, which has been one of my frustrations since arriving here, has ironically enabled many of my friendships to blossom because people have offered to take me to all sorts of wonderful places. I have had some great experiences that would have been quite different if I had gone off driving on my own, so really it has been a blessing in disguise!

5. What has been the biggest benefit of the exchange so far?

DONNA:

- Confidence in my ability to adapt to a variety of systems, requirements, and enquiries has been boosted enormously.
- Also more confident socially. If I can mix it in Yorkshire, I can mix it anywhere!
- I feel my previous library experience has been of some benefit to the DWP and I also feel that the knowledge I am gaining will serve the Mackay Regional Council when I return. Sometimes a fresh perspective on things can make all the difference.

- Have met some truly lovely people both professionally and socially, and think I can add to my list of 'life-long' friends.
- Gaining an in depth experience of a different (although similar) culture, and seeing all the places I never thought I'd get to see.
- Seeing my daughter grow with similar experiences and generally 'drink it all in'.

GRAHAM: My last experience of working in public libraries in the UK was not a wholly positive one so I was nervous about coming back to public libraries, but I am pleased to say that working in Mackay has really restored my faith in public libraries. The library service here is positive, committed, and forward-thinking with strong leadership and clear goals. I have learned so much and also feel that I have contributed a lot to the service. As Donna says, a fresh perspective is very valuable for the host organisation and I think that my different experiences have offered an alternative solution to some of the challenges that Mackay faces.

The biggest benefit by far has been meeting some wonderful people. The staff at Mackay libraries have been so kind and welcoming and I have already made some great friendships that will endure long after I return to the UK. I have also met some lovely locals outside of work – Australians are so up-front and friendly that it's impossible not to! The fun times we have shared and the memories I have made will be the most valuable things I will take home with me.

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An American tale

In early 2007 I received a letter that would quite literally change my life – I had won a Green Card in United States Green Card Lottery. In August 2008, after a year and a half of background checking, form submitting, a consular interview, and wrapping up my Australian life, I immigrated to the United States and set up a home in New York City. I did not place much importance on job hunting beforehand as I wanted time to settle in and, from what I had been monitoring for eighteen months prior to my move, the United States library market did not seem too bad. I had just resigned from six years in a wonderful role at the Victorian Parliamentary Library, participated in the ALIA Professional Development Program and had many years of ALIA service behind me, and completed an MBIT from RMIT University – so I saw myself in good stead.

But if you remember it was in August 2008 that the economic crisis spun out of control. As the Australian dollar plummeted against the greenback, I saw my job prospects evaporate into dust.

Throughout this time I learned a lot about finding a job in United States. The main points of advice I can offer are:

- The job application process is a drawn out affair, and much longer than in Australia (as well the UK from my experience there.) It is not unheard of to hear back from applications that had been submitted more than five months earlier.
- Working in an academic library is a lot different to the academic libraries in Australia. It is worth examining these differences if you are in that field and wish to engage in the American experience. Many librarians here work towards tenure and at many institutions two Masters degrees are required.