



AND THE AWARD GOES TO...

A *LIA confers a range of awards to recognise the achievements and professional contributions of our members. Why do we do it and what do the winners make of the experience?*

For professional associations such as ALIA, award programs are designed to recognise and honour outstanding contributions to the profession, and to recognise excellence and pioneering work in library and information services.

ALIA's award program is an important element in the many activities and programs ALIA undertakes to encourage professional development, and to promote the objects of the Association.

For the winner, perhaps the most obvious and immediate result of winning an award is that intensely personal moment of satisfaction and validation. Jan Richards, a 2013 recipient of our highest peer-nominated award, the ALIA Fellowship, says for her that moment was truly special. So special, it momentarily left her speechless.

'My colleagues are used to me bursting out of my office and uttering the feared words "you'll never guess what!" when I receive a particularly exciting phone call, but when ALIA rang to tell me of my ALIA Fellowship I sat, quite shell-shocked, for quite a few minutes,' Jan says.

'It will sound corny, but the unexpected honour of the news totally took me by surprise, and the fact that Fellowships are peer-nominated added to that sense of "WOW!" You're not really supposed to know who your nominators were, but the library world is pretty small and as I hold mine in enormous professional (and personal) regard, it added to the sense of achievement.'

Manager of Central West Libraries in New South Wales, Jan was awarded her Fellowship for 'distinguished contribution to the practice of library and information science in Australia' and in recognition of her efforts as a 'passionate, long term, public advocate for Australian libraries throughout her career'.

Recognition beyond the profession was equally satisfying for Jan. 'I was duly congratulated by my organisation and colleagues (complete with the requisite morning tea) but perhaps the most satisfying response was comments made by community members who'd seen the story in the local media – not because they were saying well done, but because they invariably said how great our library service and, in particular, our staff were,' she says.

'It may sound trite but my award was only possible because of the support and inspiration of those I work with.'

ALIA also recognises outstanding achievement by students in the profession. Some have been already been working in the sector for a time, others are switching careers and embarking on a new and exciting pathway. ALIA's student awards are as much about developing connections in the profession for new graduates as they are about student assessment results.

Dr Stuart Ferguson is the Knowledge and Information Studies Course Convenor for the Masters in Information Studies (Online) program at the University of Canberra. He says that, as an educator, he has been keen to arrange student awards with the relevant professional associations, but he admits he has previously wondered whether awards have as much significance for postgraduate students studying online as they do for on campus undergraduates. He has come to the conclusion that they do.

'There is no doubt awards help recent graduates stand out in the employment stakes, which is so important,' he says.

'Yes, potential employers have academic transcripts to guide them, but seeing that a graduate is the highest performer in a specific cohort of students tells the employer a lot about that person's abilities and aptitude for hard work, particularly when most of our postgraduates are balancing study, work and family commitments. I'm delighted to see associations such as ALIA recognise this.'

A past recipient of the ALIA Student Award at the University of Canberra, Yasmin Birchall, agrees. She says she has found having an award on her resume a useful addition, regardless of the fact that her career path since winning has diverged from traditional library roles.

'I received the award at a time that was (and it still is) quite challenging for librarians because of the shrinking number of jobs available in the industry, so it was useful to be able to have an industry recognition on my CV,' Yasmin says.

In the past, Yasmin has worked in a range of libraries, including as a health librarian and in public and

government libraries. She now manages healthcare projects for a large not-for-profit.

'Since winning the award, I haven't actually worked in a library, but still consider myself fortunate to be working as an information professional doing work that I love. LIS studies certainly help in equipping graduates with a broad toolbox of skills that can be applied to a wide range of employment situations,' she says.

Research shows employee recognition can have powerful and positive effects on staff turnover and productivity. Effective award programs encourage recipients to increase their level of engagement with their institutions and are critical to supporting ongoing levels of motivation for personal and professional development.

ALIA also awards research grants each year to foster this development. Bursaries of up to \$5,000 are offered to enable Members to undertake 'research on a selected library or information issue of present and future relevance to the development and improvement of library and information services in Australia'. The twin objectives of these grants are to create an opportunity for self development and to benefit the recipient's institution and present position.

In 2013, Roxanne Missingham, currently University Librarian and Chief Scholarly Information Officer at Australian National University, applied for a research grant to gain a better understanding of information needs to support Australia's policy of engagement with Asia.

Being successful in her application inspired her to think more broadly about 'how libraries benefit the mission of research in Australia, in terms of the impact on the Australian community,' she says.

An award such as a research grant can start a ripple that lasts throughout a career, or spur a line of investigation that may eventually have significant consequences for an institution and even more broadly for the practice of a profession. For example, Roxanne says the experience has motivated her to read more widely and work through theories ranging from the impact of public policy to science communication, triple helix theory, and the integration of resources and policy and industry change.

'Without the impetus [of the research grant] I would not have read or thought as deeply in these areas,' Roxanne says.

'I have also realised how really hard it is to do research and to gain the time of national figures. It has led to many great conversations (and arguments, including at the recent Research Applications in Information and Library Studies [RAILS] conference) where discussions have been very profound about policy decision making and what role libraries can play as 'honest brokers' – and whether

we need to think quite differently about how we support national engagement.'

Applying for a research grant or winning a merit award certainly says something about the drive and stamina of the recipient. Going the extra mile when everyone is seemingly already working harder and longer than ever is a big ask.

As Jan Richards says, 'It's almost 12 months since I received that call and I still have to pinch myself. It's so easy to get caught up in the day to day and wonder if the "extra" is worth it.'

'I've always been a great believer that you get out of life what you put into it and I love the buzz that my involvement in our profession brings me; the projects I'm involved with, the people I've met. The ALIA Fellowship is the icing on the cake.'

Where, how and who won?

You can find information about ALIA's awards and grants programs on the ALIA website, along with information and citations for past award recipients.

Want to know more about applying for an award? Contact us via email at awards@alia.org.au or phone (02) 6215 8222.



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