



PONDERING PAST PRESIDENTS

The conference room of ALIA House in Canberra has a wall of portraits depicting past presidents of the Association. I always find it intriguing to think about this seemingly august group. Is it a rogues' gallery or a host of angels? Their professional strengths and achievements can be easily discovered, but what about their personal habits and foibles?

What motivated them? What gave them sleepless nights? How effective were they as people and as professionals? Advertisements for a popular genealogy database suggests that users will be able to uncover the past and discover stories of their forebears. I too have stories to tell. I knew or know about 75 percent of the 55 other past presidents of the Association. Regrettably, this is not the place to reveal anecdotes about them. That will have to await the release of my memoirs.

Now that my term as President has drawn to a close, I've been reflecting on ALIA achievements over the past 12 months as well as what lies ahead. That brought me to think about some of the past presidents of the Association whose achievements are probably unknown to the majority of present members.

As we hurtle toward the future, it is worth pausing to reflect on the contributions made by our predecessors. The Australian Institute of Librarians was established in 1937 and early presidents and members worked hard to gain recognition of librarianship as a profession. While larger libraries had in-house training schemes, there were no nationally recognised credentials. The Institute established the Registration Examination, which allowed individuals to be accredited as professional librarians.

By 1980, a number of universities were offering courses in librarianship, so the Registration Examination ceased to be offered. The Association directed its focus to accrediting the courses offered by educational institutions. This has contributed to the recognition both nationally and internationally of accredited courses as being of a high quality.

For many years, the future looked rosy, bright and predictable. Sure, there were some difficult times that threatened stability. The introduction of bachelor degrees in librarianship caused great consternation. Many in the profession believed that librarians should

have a degree plus library qualifications. The acceptance of library technicians as members of ALIA occasioned a similar furore.

In retrospect, these were relatively minor storms in the library teacup. But now the safety of the entire tea set has been challenged by the tsunami of automation and digital technologies. Skills and knowledge that were once highly regarded have lost some or all of their value and desirability. Over time, the roles and functions of many libraries and information services have metamorphosed. An increasing number of workers in the industry are qualified in areas other than librarianship.

Accreditation continues to be an important ALIA function. In recent years we have emphasised the importance of continuing professional development. Forty percent of eligible Members now participate in the ALIA PD Scheme, and from 2020, participation will be mandatory for new Members wishing to attain and retain professional status. Members of other professions – such as teaching, pharmacy and medicine – are already required to undertake a minimum level of structured professional development each year in order to retain their accreditation for practice.

Professional qualifications and staff development have been key issues throughout the history of the Association. Past presidents – such as Eleanor Archer, John Balnaves and Margaret Trask – were great advocates for the profession as a whole and for the importance of sector-specific qualifications. They also supported the continuing development of staff skills as a responsibility of both employers and employees.

In an ever-changing world, can industry-specific qualifications and skills remain relevant? There are considerable challenges ahead for professional organisations and the way in which they recognise qualifications. To stay relevant and maintain members, ALIA is constantly reviewing the qualifications that identify a professional member.

Should specialist qualifications be necessary in the future to work in a library or information service? Yes, but in the future a broader definition may need to apply to the requisite qualifications. That definition must include knowledge of the underlying principles, concepts and theory of the sector. Failure to ensure this professional content will be detrimental to the future of our profession and a betrayal of 80 years of lobbying by our predecessors.

As I hand the presidential baton to Patricia Genat, I am thankful for the support and contribution that she and other Board members have given to me and ALIA over the past year. The work of Board was greatly facilitated by the diligent efficiency of Sue McKerracher and the team at ALIA House and the state coordinators. My congratulations to Vicki McDonald as the incoming Vice President and to the newly elected Board Members. 🌟

JOHN SHIPP, FALIA
ALIA President

