

Education, education, education...



Alan Bundy

ALIA president 2001
alan.bundy@alia.org.au

Over the years I have read several overseas and Australian consultancy reports about the image and marketing of libraries and our profession. They have ranged from the facile to those which have understood the complexities of our role and the extent and potential of our contribution. One of the better reports *Issues for Victorian public libraries in 2001* prepared for the State Library and the Department of Infrastructure by the Strategy Shop, although focused on public libraries, describes the substance of the issue for librarianship well.

- *How can the dynamism within the library profession be conveyed to the community?*
- *How can the images of the library workforce be changed to reflect the reality of their contribution to society today? Who should initiate this process?*
- *How can libraries harness their commitment and dynamism to win strategic gain for their profession? Who should have responsibility for this?*
- *How can the sector's professional organisations act strategically to reinvigorate the profession and recreate it as a modern occupation? (p15)*

Big questions indeed, and not easily addressed, but the renewed ALIA, with its clear objects and outcomes-based structure, aims to provide the leadership in the reinvigoration of the profession called for in the Victorian paper. Those ALIA objects will be the criteria against which your Board of Directors will conduct its decision making over the next year and beyond. Let me remind you what they are:

- a *to promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy and democracy;*
- b *to promote and improve the services provided by all kinds of library and foster their professional interests and aspirations;*
- c *to ensure the high standard of personnel engaged in information provision and foster their professional interests and aspirations;*
- d *to represent the interests of members to governments, other organisations and the community; and*
- e *to encourage people to contribute to the improvement of library and information services through support and membership of the Association.*

On that first object I reflected in the May Frontline *Information rights — the bottom line*. Two recent papers cause me to reflect now on object (c) because if what those papers and employers express has substance, there is now little confidence in the capacity of Australian universities to enrol and educate the new professionals needed to address the issues described in the Victorian issues paper.

Librarianship is not the only profession in Australia to be concerned about the condition of Australian higher education. The reality of this concern is conveyed well in Ross Harvey's recent article 'Losing the quality battle in Australian education for librarianship' (*ALJ* February 2001 pp15–22). He identifies key issues as: the need for librarianship education focused on the development of critical thinking rather than skills; loss of a secure sense of the field of librarianship; lack of critical staffing mass in most library schools; lack of distinction between the roles of library technicians and librarians; failure to promote librarianship as a graduate (professional masters) profession; the lack of senior profes-

sionals involved in, and promoting research degrees and workplace research; and generally weak academic record of students admitted into graduate diplomas and masters-level programs, the result of which 'have been a deterioration in quality, especially in the thinking and problem-solving abilities of librarians. This may not be evident in the workplace yet, but certainly will be when the current crop of senior library managers retire'.

Strong words, yet hard to refute. I agree with Ross, and I would be surprised if other library managers do not have real concerns about the impoverishment and identity loss of library education in Australia. It was for this reason that the University of South Australia Library sponsored the *Reflective practice in library and information studies education for the future* seminar in December 1999 which was facilitated by Canadian Professor Key Haycock who had also chaired the American Library Association's 1999 *Congress on professional education*, a congress born of a concern about the direction of library education in the United States. Library educators themselves in Australia are in an unenviable quandary, as are many of their university colleagues. Few, if any, would be content about overall student quality and motivation, their own staffing numbers, and funding and time for needed research, professional development and industrial placement. Library technician programs, largely within TAFE institutes, face similar constraints.

Apparently only two Australian library schools now have the absolute minimum of six full-time academic staff plausibly identified by Ross Harvey. This begs the question as to whether it is in the long-term interests of the profession for ALIA to continue to recognise programs in universities which can not or will not, resource them properly. It was with a similar sense of concern that my immediate predecessor Mairéad Browne concluded her presidential term with a paper to the Board of Directors proposing a meeting of ALIA, education providers and employers to ensure 'adequate career-long education for the profession' in a context of 'a deteriorating situation in provision of education for beginning level practitioners in many universities where demand levels and markets play a major role in determining what courses are offered'.

Or as Ross Harvey puts it 'The library profession can not rely on the academics to take all of the lead under the current regime, where the imperative is less to support quality programs than it is to maintain maximum levels of funding... The profession must rely on its own resources to make these changes.'

In May 1997 a government was elected in the UK which has improved the status and visibility of librarians, libraries and the public library network in particular. It was elected on a manifesto with three key policy strengths — *Education, education, education*. It is a good manifesto for a profession with a critical contribution to make to an educated knowledge nation — but one which needs to get its own educational house in order if it is to do it well. For that profession — librarianship — there is no more important issue. Agree? Disagree? Send your letters to incite@alia.org.au. ■

...the renewed ALIA, with its clear objects and outcomes-based structure, aims to provide the leadership in the reinvigoration of the profession...