

Providing the big picture

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The Australian Library Collections Task Force is convened by the National Library of Australia to investigate issues relating to access to library resources in Australia. Membership is drawn from the library and research communities, and covers a range of subject areas. The Task Force meets twice a year, most recently in February 2001.

The initial focus of Task Force work was investigation of issues arising out of the National Round Table on Access to Overseas Monographs (<http://www.nla.gov.au/niac/meetings/rtable.html>), with a major study *Looking for books* (<http://www.nla.gov.au/initiatives/alctf/cantrell.html>) published in 1999. *Looking for books*, by Professor Leon Cantrell from the University of Western Sydney, provides an overview of the experiences of academics and postgraduate students seeking access to research materials in Psychology and English. Significant numbers of researchers in both subject areas were of the opinion that the library in their institution was not able to meet the needs of researchers. A majority of the researchers in both disciplines had difficulty accessing required monographic material. The report highlighted the need for improvements in the interlibrary loans system, and confirmed the importance of the National Bibliographic Database as a resource-sharing tool.

The Task Force has been responsible for a number of surveys which have further investigated these issues by identifying key collections not catalogued on the National Bibliographic Database (<http://www.nla.gov.au/initiatives/alctf/meeting3/item4.html>). Libraries were surveyed to determine the extent to which their collections are represented, and a more detailed survey identified, then ranked, individual collections according to their research value (<http://www.nla.gov.au/initiatives/alctf/meeting4/item5.html>). The National Library and the libraries holding these key collections are currently exploring avenues for improving the accessibility of their collections.

A more recent project has been an investigation into access to science serials in Australian libraries. Researchers at universities and research institutions were asked about their use of libraries, interlibrary loan services and electronic resources, and their opinions on the adequacy of the library within their own institution for their field of study. Professor Neville Fletcher of the Australian National University has been guiding this study, to be published during 2001. Key

issues identified include a concern with interlibrary loan processes and efficiency, and the rapid change from print to electronic serials access. The National Library is planning further work on the issues surrounding interlibrary loan, and will report back to the next meeting, scheduled for August 2001.

Document delivery is the subject of extensive scrutiny in a major benchmarking exercise being undertaken by the National Resource Sharing Working Group (<http://www.nla.gov.au/initiatives/nrswg/>), which seeks to ensure that a robust, reliable and cost-effective interlending system, built on co-operation and agreed service standards and policies, is in place to serve Australian libraries and their users. The benchmarking study will provide information crucial to the continued improvement of the interlibrary loans system.

The National Library's own serials review project provides regular reports to the Task Force, and has so far examined titles in Anthropology, Economics, Geography, History, Language and linguistics, Literature, Philosophy, Politics and Religion. These reports can be accessed at <http://www.nla.gov.au/collect/osbooks.html>.

Work in progress includes a series of focus groups with academics at various universities, to gain an insight into their attitudes to and use of electronic resources. The first of these, with a group of physicists at Sydney University, took place in November 2000, with the results reported at the February 2001 meeting. Physicists have a well-established system of e-print archiving, are quite comfortable with electronic journals, and find very little reason to visit libraries in person, except for older materials. Contrary to expectations, this group regarded monographs as a very useful resource, particularly for providing overviews of the field. A series of focus groups will be held over the next few months in a range of subject areas to provide further information on this very topical issue. Particular areas of interest include the ease of use of electronic resources, the advantages and disadvantages of these resources, and the extent to which users of electronic resources are supported by their libraries.

Additional information about the Australian Library Collections Task Force, including many of the papers from its meetings, can be found at <http://www.nla.gov.au/initiatives/alctf/>. ■

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