Reflections on the past year in Australian library life

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In 2009, libraries in Australia have faced many challenges, as well as many opportunities. A number of conferences have brought library and information professionals together to discuss the key issues, with lobbying and advocacy driving professional and industry activities. Library education has also been in the spotlight, with some interesting national research initiatives helping the LIS sector consider the future.

Keywords: Australia; education 2009; library development

Betrachtung zum australischen Bibliotheksgeschehen im vergangenen Jahr

2009 sahen sich die Bibliotheken in Australien vielen Herausforderungen, aber auch vielen neuen Möglichkeiten gegenüber. Eine Reihe von Konferenzen haben die Bibliotheks- und Informationsprofis zusammengeführt, um zentrale Themen zu diskutieren und dafür zu sorgen, dass sich der Berufsstand und die gesamte Branche entwickeln. Im Zentrum stand außerdem die Bibliotheksausbildung mit einigen interessanten nationalen Forschungsprojekten, die dem Bibliotheks- und Informationsektor dabei helfen werden, über die Zukunft nachzudenken.

Schlüsselwörter: Australien; Ausbildung 2009; Bibliotheksentwicklung

Réflexions sur l’année passée des événements bibliothécaires en Australie

En 2009 les bibliothèques en Australie se trouvaient en face de beaucoup de défis, mais aussi de beaucoup de possibilités nouvelles. Une série de conférences a réuni les professionnels bibliothécaires et de l’information afin de discuter des sujets centraux et de prendre soin que la profession et tout le secteur se développent. En outre la formation bibliothécaire fut au centre avec quelques projets intéressants de recherches nationaux. Ils vont aider le secteur bibliothécaire et d’information de réfléchir sur l’avenir.

Mots-clés: Australie; formation 2009; développement des bibliothèques

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1 Introduction

Australia is an interesting place: in terms of area, it is the sixth largest country in the world; it is the smallest continent, yet the largest island, with more than 25 000 km of coastline. It is almost as wide as it is long: it is 4 000 km wide, from East to West, and 3 700 km long, from the tip of Cape York in the north, to South East Cape on the south coast of Tasmania. The population is creeping up to 22 million; settlement is highly urbanised, with most people living in the capital cities or large regional town hugging the coast. More than 85 % live within 50 km of the sea.

The library and information services (LIS) sector is comprised of public, academic and special libraries. The National Library of Australia is located in the Federal capital, Canberra, and there is a State or Territory Library in
the capital city of each State or Territory. There are more than 1500 public libraries, ranging to major branches in the cities, to tiny places in rural and remote areas. In the academic sector there are 38 university libraries and about 70 libraries supporting colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). There are also more than 1 000 corporate and government libraries; school libraries number around 9 000. Government statistical data reports that there are around 10 000 librarians (professionals), 6 000 library technicians (paraprofessionals) and 8 000 library assistants with no formal LIS qualifications.

While there are a number of small professional associations supporting the industry on a geographic or sectoral basis, e.g. Queensland Public Libraries Association (QPLA), the Council of Australian University Libraries (CAUL) or the Arts Libraries Society of Australia and New Zealand (Arlis/ANZ), the peak industry association is the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), with around 6 000 members (both individual and institutional). ALIA plays a significant role in drawing LIS professionals together through many diverse issues and activities.

This column is being drafted at the end of 2009. In Australia, the summer holidays cover the period of December-January, so both philosophically and behaviouristically, December brings a true sense of 'the end of the year'. Consequently, the column reflects on some of the main events and happenings in 2009, with some ideas about what the coming year might bring. However, it is naturally not possible to cover everything that has occurred, so the column really offers a bit of a snapshot, or a taster, of Australian library life. The menu today includes some of the conferences, some of the lobbying and advocacy activities, and some insights into LIS education. Links to further information are provided at the end of the column.

2 Professional conferences and meetings

Perhaps one of the most disappointing matters facing the Australian library profession this year was the decision made by the IFLA Governing Board to change the location of the 2010 IFLA World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) from Brisbane to Göteborg in Sweden. Many librarians across the world were excited about having the opportunity to visit Australia for the first time, through their attendance at IFLA in Brisbane. Many librarians in Australia were also excited about the opportunity to attend an IFLA congress in their own country.

The decision to change the venue was an extremely difficult decision to make. The organisation of the IFLA WLIC is a complex activity, involving a number of parties:

- IFLA Headquarters: staff have responsibility for planning, budgeting, programming, international promotion, interpreters and onsite services.
- Congrex: the Professional Conference Organised contracted to IFLA is responsible for financial management, international sponsorship, exhibition sales, venue, promotion, registration and accommodation.
- The National Committee: representatives of the library profession and the national library association in the host country are jointly responsible for government sponsorship, social and cultural events, library visits and local promotion.

One critical issue was the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the impact of which reverberated across the world. A large proportion of participants at IFLA events is drawn from North America and Europe: Australian librarians know all too well the distances and expense involved in attending conferences in the northern hemisphere. There was a keen awareness that the GFC was resulting in widespread budget cuts, which had direct implications for the capacity of library professionals to travel and to attend conferences. As there were widespread reports about conference attendance, and also levels of sponsorship, falling as organisations tightened their financial belts, it was inevitable that the plans for a Congress at 'the other side of the world' should be reviewed in order to avoid the risks impacting on the sustainability of IFLA as an organisation.

Jan Richards, President of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) has explained the situation: "The IFLA Governing Board and the National Committee believed that relocating the Congress was necessary to ensure the long-term business continuity of our international federation and its ability to continue its very important work on behalf of all libraries and library associations around the world. So, while fundraising at the local level was progressing well, the projected shortfall was determined to be an unacceptable burden to IFLA."

ALIA and its membership have accepted the decision of the IFLA Governing Board and have begun to think to the future. While many people, committed to the goals and activities of IFLA, will now head to Sweden in August 2010, it has also been important to plan for a forum for Australian library professionals.

ALIA has a program of conferences that are spread over a two year cycle to meet the diverse industry needs:

- ALIA Biennial Conference
- ALIA National Library and Information Technicians’ Conference
- ALIA Information Online Conference and Exhibition
- ALIA New Librarians Symposium (NLS)

It has been decided that the ALIA Biennial Conference would not be held in 2010, with the IFLA WLIC due to be held in Brisbane in August. The series of national conferences listed above does make a significant contribution to the income stream to the professional association, so it was important to move quickly into planning mode for a national event in 2010 which would fit in with the overall schedule of professional events.

In order to be nimble, ALIA set up a wiki and arranged a national teleconference to collect and review suggestions and ideas about the event. The dates for ALIA Access 2010 have been set for early September 2010, in Brisbane. The event will be more ‘modular’ than the traditional conferences, with a series of streams being developed by different
special interest groups that reflect the diverse perspectives of the library sector. These streams will include some meetings organised by the:
- ALIA Interlending Advisory Committee
- ALIA New Graduates Advisory Committee
- ALIA TAFE Librarians Advisory Committee
- ALIA Public Libraries Advisory Committee
- ALIA Acquisitions Group
- ALIA Health Libraries Australia
- ALIA On-Person Australian Libraries Group (OPALs)
while other streams will focus on specific cross-sectoral issues:
- Library leadership
- LIS education
- Information literacy
- Sustainable libraries.

The conference event will enable participants to focus specifically on their own areas of interest, but also to collaborate across different areas of professional practice. Planning is still in early stages, but further information will soon be made available on the ALIA website.

Other conferences have been held in 2009 that have brought together LIS academics and practitioners to discuss issues of importance to the sector. In late October, CAVAL, a consortium of academic libraries, hosted the People in the Information Profession conference in Melbourne, which sought to address the theme of reinvigorating the library and information profession with three main foci:
- Seek and Keep (Recruitment and retention)
- GPS to the Future (Planning and forecasting)
- Got What it Takes? (Competencies, career and talent management).

The event attracted both local and international participants, which allowed the key topics of workforce planning, staff development, new professional aspirations, and leadership to be discussed. A selection of the full papers has been published in the journal Library Management (volume 30, issue 8/9). It is hoped that this conference which examines issues associated with human resources management in libraries and information services will be held every two years.

Meanwhile, in Townsville in Far North Queensland, representatives from the public library sector came together in October 2009 for the conference Change and Challenge, to consider the impact of the multiple challenges of technological, organisational and community change on libraries. The conference was hosted by Public Libraries Australia (PLA) and Queensland Public Libraries Association (QPLA), with support from ALIA. One of the interesting papers focused on demographic change in Australia, presented by Bernard Salt (2009). Salt is an author, commentator and advisor on consumer, cultural and demographic change, with a regular column in The Australian newspaper.

Critical issues raised in the presentation included demographic change, with the population of Australia predicted to increase from the current figure of 22 million to around 36 million in 2050. Areas of Australia, in particular Queensland (including Brisbane, Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast, Moreton Bay, Ipswich and Cairns) and to a certain extent Western Australia (for example, Wanneroo), are already experiencing high levels of population growth. While city dwellers who relocate to the coast are referred to as the ‘sea change’ movement, there is a growing profile of ‘tree change’ communities, as people also build new lives in rural areas along the coastal strip of the country. The population mix is also changing, with the ethnic base shifting from a predominantly Anglo-Mediterranean profile to accommodate new Asian influences.

Meanwhile, there is also an aging demographic, as Australians live longer, healthier lives. Life expectancy has increased from 71 years in 1969 to 82 years in 2009. Over the next few years, the ‘Baby Boomer’ generation reaches retirement age, but will strive to lead an active, intellectually stimulating life during their retirement. In his presentation, Salt highlighted the need for libraries to consider not only the impact of these changing demographic factors on the user profile of libraries, but also the workforce. With 44% of librarians already aged over 50 years, the sector not only needs to consider recruitment strategies to attract younger Generation Y workers, but also to consider the human capital opportunities provided by an increased number of educated volunteers who wish to be productively involved in community activities. It is essential that public libraries respond to – and proactively anticipate – new models of non-centralised urban areas, to ensure that libraries are well positioned to become hubs of technology, culture, learning and social interaction.

3 Lobbying and Advocacy

As noted earlier, Australia is a vast country. This means that as a national professional association, ALIA needs to consider ways to capture regional issues affecting libraries. One strategy used to encourage members to voice their opinions on a range of matters is the National Advisory Congress (NAC). The NAC is part of the association’s constitution and is considered an important part of the planning process. It provides an annual opportunity for ALIA members and directors to come together to discuss policies, issues and other matters affecting the association. It is also an opportunity for members to provide feedback on a variety of matters and to identify emerging issues that may need to be addressed by the association.

The NAC process occurs each year, commencing with a series of regional meetings chaired by one of the directors of the ALIA Board. Most of the meetings tend to be in the capital city in each State or Territory, with additional meetings held in regional centres (e.g. Townsville in Queensland) and via teleconferences to include members in more isolated areas. Continuity is provided by ensuring one of the key issues raised in the NAC meeting one year becomes the theme of the subsequent NAC to be explored and discussed in greater detail. In 2008, ALIA conducted a survey of both personal members and institutional members, so it was also possible to relate the themes for the NAC to the issues considered of greatest importance by the members’ survey.

The topic of discussion at the NAC meetings in September-October 2009 was lobbying and advocacy. Lobby-
ing refers to the process of working on strategic or policy initiatives, generally with the goal of influencing outcomes at the government level, while advocacy focuses on ways in which diverse industry issues can be communicated to a wide range of stakeholders to encourage understanding, support and positive action. The public library sector in Australia is one area where considerable lobbying and advocacy activity has been taking place in recent months.

The ALIA Public Libraries Summit was hosted by the association in Canberra in July. This forum brought together representatives of public libraries, State Libraries and the National Library of Australia, along with politicians and advisors from the three levels of government (local, state and territory, and Federal) to discuss the future of public libraries in the 21st century. The Summit, which addressed the overarching theme of ‘Setting a National Agenda’ was opened by Senator Ursula Stevens, Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and for the Voluntary Sector.

Topics that were explored included social inclusion and community engagement, to consider the role of libraries as ‘hubs of community life’, as neutral spaces for learning, access to the internet and e-learning, as well as the issues associated with child development, early reading and a literate Australia, with the digital economy and digital citizenship, and with health and aging. Information about the ALIA Public Libraries Summit with links to the submissions received and the presentations delivered on the day can be located on the ALIA website.

The Summit presented ALIA with the mandate to lead the development of a shared vision and national framework for public libraries. The consultation document has been distributed, with responses due by the end of 2009. The principal objectives of this strategic work are:

- To provide the Federal Government with proof that public libraries, although managed locally, are able to speak with one voice at a national level and can be invited to take a seat at the table
- To ensure that politicians and ministers at the highest level have a clear understanding of how public libraries currently contribute to government priorities
- To develop a proposal for investment in national programs, which will enable public libraries to increase their contribution to these government priority areas (ALIA, 2009, p. 2).

The development of the national framework will be underpinned by research into the key areas of public library activity, into current levels of resourcing, and into the impact of referrals of clients by government agencies, in order to develop a strong business case for Federal funding of a national public library system.

Amongst the initiatives launched at the ALIA Public Libraries Summit were the Public Library Ambassadors program and a new publication to support advocacy activities, the Little Book of Public Libraries. The goal of the Public Library Ambassadors program is to appoint up to one hundred active public library ambassadors to foster a more active appreciation of public libraries within and across communities. It is hoped that the ambassadors will become the ‘face’ of the library to help influence public opinion about libraries in the local area. It is likely that the ambassadors will be a mix of grass-roots members of the community and celebrities who can use their connections, talents and reputation to promote the value of public libraries in their lives and to maximise the opportunities for attracting media attention.

The Little Book of Public Libraries has been described as ‘a little treasure’: it is a simple snapshot of why libraries are so important to the community, with the words and ideas that library supporters can use to champion the cause. One page provides the statistical data about public libraries:

There are over 1,500 public libraries across Australia and 8,200 library staff who provide expert guidance. Almost ten million people or nearly 50% of the population are library members and many more of us use them as study spaces, for online research, and just to browse the collections of books, CDs, DVDs and magazines, giving a total of 111 million annual visits.

Abb. 1: The Little Book of Public Libraries

The Little Book of Public Libraries presents an overview of the role played by libraries in a changing world, to support the diverse needs of many different users in the community and to make a positive contribution to the economy. It is considered a handy little book to distribute widely, for example to library staff, to contacts in local government, to the local Member of Parliament – and the opposition candidates, as well as to the principal, teachers and teacher-librarians at the local schools, to local doctors to have in their waiting room, to every community group that uses the facilities of the library, and to people of standing – who may in turn be encouraged to become a Public Library Ambassador.

Another initiative that has had a significant impact is the Living Libraries Australia program. This is a partnership between ALIA, Lismore City Council and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, which seeks to connect and strengthen local communities through conversation. Instead of borrowing a book, library visitors can ‘borrow’ a living person for a conversation. The program draws on ideas developed in Denmark in 2000, when the Roskilde Festival introduced 75 living ‘books’ that could be borrowed by the young people attending the event (Pearse, 2009). The scheme was first introduced to Australia in Lismore, a town in regional NSW, in 2006, and has since spread across the country. The City of Melville has established an Indigenous Living Library, with ‘books’ from the indigenous populations of Western Australia and the Northern Territory, to share information about country, culture and growing up. Other living libraries are to be found in the Redlands area
of Brisbane and in Victoria through the Swinburne University of Technology.

Early in 2009, a number of communities of Victoria were hit hard by the bushfires that ravaged swept through the area. 78 towns were directly affected by the bushfires, 7,500 people were displaced, 2,029 homes were destroyed and 173 people lost their lives. While, amazingly, no public libraries suffered any damage at all, the buildings served an important role as havens from the horror in the days after the fires. There was an immediate response from the library profession to help these communities in need in a tangible way (Bespoke Results, 2009). The Rebuilding with Books campaign was established by ALIA in conjunction with the Australian Booksellers Association, in association with the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, several State government departments and many Victorian library agencies. While it will take time to rebuild the houses that were destroyed, the Rebuilding with Books program focuses on the things that can make a house a 'home': to provide new books to families with empty bookshelves. The campaign encouraged donations of used and new books that could be distributed to families as they re-established their lives. In the first six months, of course, books were not high on the list of priorities for the bushfire-affected communities, but interest has grown in the last few months with the main activity happening in October 2009, when over 400,000 books were sorted by 36 volunteers.

There was also a week-long campaign in bookshops around Australia to encourage customers to purchase book vouchers that could be distributed to families. While the immediate need for action has followed the bushfires in Victoria, the development work has been structured into a broader framework for disaster planning, response and recovery to ensure that resources are available to communities that might suffer natural disasters in the future.

At the other end of the scale, there are some wonderful new libraries being built in Australia. The new Wanneroo Library and Cultural Centre was officially opened at the end of October 2009. Wanneroo is a fast growing town on the edge of Perth in Western Australia; the current population of 134,000 is expected to increase by 20% over the next two years. The city council has invested AUD 18.5 million in the new community facilities, which include the library, regional museum, exhibition gallery, theatrette and cafe. The gallery has been built to a standard which will enable national and international touring exhibitions to be shown, providing new opportunities for cultural activities in the region. The library itself houses an excellent selection of public art works, created by artist Rick Verney, with a collection of objects representing seeds, fruit and flowers to reflect the theme of ‘Gardens and Growth’.

Abb. 2: Young readers: Rebuilding with Books campaign

Abb. 3: Interior of City of Wanneroo Library, Western Australia

4 LIS education

While the profession considers the many dimensions of change impacting on library services and the library workforce, there has also been an interest amongst LIS educators to appraise the knowledge and skills required for effective practice. In Australia, professional qualifications, i.e. to become a librarian, are offered by universities at both the undergraduate (Bachelor degree) and postgraduate (Graduate Diploma and Master degree) levels. There is also a paraprofessional qualification (Diploma), i.e. to become a library technician, which is offered by colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and some private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). ALIA plays a role to accredit
the LIS courses, which are directly linked to categories of membership of the professional association: candidates with professional qualifications gained from accredited courses may apply to become an Associate member of ALIA, while candidates with paraprofessional qualifications may apply for Library Technician membership (Hallam, 2009).

In terms of professional education, the Australian Teaching and Learning Council (ALTC), a national agency that funds research into learning and teaching in higher education, has recently funded two significant projects that scrutinise LIS education. Associate Professor Helen Partridge from Queensland University of Technology (QUT) was awarded an ALTC Associate Fellowship to examine the current and anticipated skills and knowledge required by successful LIS professionals in the age of Web 2.0 (and beyond). The first stage of the project has involved a series of focus groups conducted with the goal of collecting data on the understandings and perceptions of LIS professionals. The findings from this stage of the research are presented in a discussion paper (Partridge, Lee & Munro, 2009). The next stage of the project involves in depth discussions with educators to determine the extent to which LIS education programs currently support the development of librarian 2.0.

Abb. 4: Associate Professor Helen Partridge

This preliminary work has led into a further national research project involving all universities that offer LIS education programs (undergraduate and postgraduate). This collaborative project, led by Queensland University of Technology, will be undertaken in 2010-2011, with the aim of re-conceptualising and re-positioning Australian library and information science education for the twenty-first century.

The project seeks to develop a Framework for the Education of the Information Professions in Australia. This new Framework will reconceptualise the Australian LIS profession and its education and training for the twenty-first century. The Framework will provide guidance on how best to reposition and reshape Australian LIS education to ensure it remains dynamic, responsive and sustainable to the evolving information age in order to meet the ever-changing marketplace demands of the 21st century. It will provide strategic directions and recommendations as well as a detailed action plan for implementation. The project will also provide a vehicle through which LIS professionals and LIS educators find opportunities for increased collaboration and more open communication. This will help not only bridge the gap between LIS theory and practice, but also foster a more inclusive and authentic engagement between LIS educators and other parts of the LIS industry in the education of the next generation of professionals (Partridge 2009, p. 1).

It is felt that the project will help engage both educators and employers in the critical discussion on the future education needs for the profession.

In a separate initiative, work is being undertaken to examine the specialised knowledge and skills required by health librarians. The project, coordinated by members of ALIA Health Libraries Australia (HLA), is referred to as neXus3, as it builds on earlier research work: the neXus census, which collected and analysed data about individuals employed in the LIS sector to develop a rich picture of education, training, recruitment and retention factors (Hallam, 2008) and neXus2, which investigated the same issues from the institutional perspective (Hallam, 2009). A survey of health library professionals and health library managers will be undertaken in January 2010, to be followed with interviews with directors of health services that include a library service. It is hoped that the research will highlight the changing nature of the skills and knowledge required by medical librarians in order to inform the development of a curriculum for a postgraduate qualification in health librarianship.

Abb. 5: Library Technician Educators Professional Development Meeting, Canberra, October 2009

It has also been a busy year in the area of paraprofessional education. The Diploma in Museum/Library and Information Services is a national training package, developed almost ten years ago. As the principal education standards body, one of ALIA’s key roles is to monitor the quality of Australian LIS education programs through the course accreditation process. These strategies seek to ensure that the institutions offering the Diploma course meet the appropriate standards of quality and integrity to ensure that students and graduates meet
the workforce needs of the sector (Hallam & Genoni, 2009). Library Technician educators attend an annual professional development workshop that facilitates collaboration on the course accreditation process. Between February and June, the course accreditation panel visited 17 educational institutions located in all capital cities, as well as a number of regional centres – which added up to more than 60,000 km of travel. The panel met with literally hundreds of stakeholders who have contributed to the process as teachers, educational managers, students, graduates and employers. The 2009 professional development day held at ALIA’s national office in Canberra in October provided the opportunity for LT educators to consider the recommendations made to improve their programs and to share examples of best practice identified during the site visits.

The process has concluded with individual reports for each of the 17 institutions, as well as a ‘state of the nation’ report which presents the overarching findings from the evaluative study and explores the key issues impacting on library technician education. In 2010, stakeholders will work with the relevant industry skills council to drive a review of the national training package to ensure that the Diploma program also supports the development of paraprofessionals who will meet the changing demands of libraries in the 21st century.

5 Conclusion

At the end of 2009, looking back and reflecting on just some of the activities that have engaged the LIS sector in Australia, there has been an awareness of the challenges that libraries face during times of financial uncertainty and unrelenting change. This column has a strong flavour of public libraries, but it can be argued that academic libraries and special libraries have equally had to contend with a dynamic environment. Some links to further resources are presented below, and the ALIA website (<http://www.alia.org.au>) is a useful place to start if readers are interested in knowing more about Australian library life. For deeper insights, a recent book presents a scholarly, but accessible, overview of library and information management in this country at the beginning of the 21st century and analyses the many issues facing the profession and gives a sense of directions in which Australian libraries are moving (Ferguson, 2007).

6 Web resources


7 References


