

FRONT L I N E



Bev Kirby — President, ALIA Victorian Branch

I am pleased to have been given the opportunity to write this column at a time when I can focus on what I believe to be the single most important issue facing our members today — that of award restructuring.

In the past few months, the Victorian Branch has continued to concern itself with award restructuring. On 8 November, a workshop arranged by Branch Council will bring together a range of people who have had some experience in dealing with this issue. After hearing keynote speakers outline union and employer attitudes to award restructuring, the participants will divide into groups concerned with different sectors — local government, public service, private sector and education — reflecting the variety of restructuring applications expected in the library and information services area.



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If you believe that award restructuring has nothing to do with you or your future in the library and information science field, think again. I hear many people say that they may be into restructuring or reclassification, but it has nothing to do with awards. My response is 'think again'. What happens in another sector, another industry or another organisation can become the norm by which our employees and, indeed, our unions, measure the worth of our qualifications and experience.

Of course there are many terms used to describe the various aspects of award efficiency', 'broadbanding', 'job reclassification' and 'multi-skilling' are not bad in themselves. It is only when the nature of the restructuring places library staff in a position of having to compete for their own jobs with people without qualifications that it can be said that we will have lost the war.

Individuals have no power; it's folly to stand alone.

Library staff in the local government sector in Victoria have started the battle. There are many questions still to be asked and still to be answered. ALIA Public Libraries Section organised a meeting in September, and the workshop on 8 November will give this group an opportunity to continue to identify the issues for library staff in that sector.

The Ministry for Education in Victoria is proposing a structure for staff in Victorian schools, which includes reclassification of librarians to within a para-professional range. This suggests to many of us that the role of librarians has been downgraded to the extent that the schools may, in the future, employ staff with less than adequate training and qualifications. I have heard reports about a proposal that library technicians in schools may be employed half time in laboratory/teacher aide roles.

While this may appeal to some administrators as multi-skilling, it would seem to me that we have a lot of work to do in identifying the potential for multi-skilling within our own field and that we should consider carefully any arrangement that could be turned to our disadvantage within the near or distant future.

It also seems to me that now, more than ever before, we need to be very

clear about what we do as librarians and library technicians. Should we be forced to take on reclassification within the organisation for which we work, let us be assured that it will not be used against us to meet some economic criterion in the future.

One of the sad facts of life for library staff is that, when it comes to priorities for unions who have the interests of many groups to support, library people may well be in a minority, and library issues and concerns may well be ignored or dismissed. With all the best intentions in the world, we may be last on the list or we may just suffer because there is a lack of understanding of what we do and what we need to know in order to do it well. We must be involved with the unions because they will be the ones who negotiate for us. As individuals we have no power in this matter and it is folly to stand alone.

I believe very strongly that we have a responsibility to use our Association to provide a link between members for the sharing of information and to provide ourselves with support for what may be for some a very private battle of a very small group within a large organisation. To this end, I encourage ALIA members to foster and support this exchange of information.

ALIA's new Industrial Information Officer, Tom McKeon, is keen to get information on how award restructuring is affecting our members. I encourage you to get your regional groups, branches and sections talking about the issue.

It seems to me that we must start now to identify the questions. There will most certainly be a variety of answers for a variety of applications. If you suspect that what you see happening now or in the future is in any way associated with award restructuring, start getting involved in information exchange.

When asked to write *Frontline* for this issue of *Incite*, I knew I wanted to write about the importance of what happens at Branch and Section level; how we need each one of our members to participate and contribute, and, by doing so, show non-members that ALIA has something special to offer. Let's focus on award restructuring and demonstrate the power of information exchange throughout and across a strong and concerned Association. After all, we are the Australian Library and Information Association — every one of us — and everyone has something to take and something to give in return.

Bev Kirby
President, ALIA Victorian Branch