

Front Line

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Branch



Should ALIA rethink its relationship with institutional members?

Private practice is common in most professions but librarianship is different. Most library technicians, librarians and other library and information workers work in institutions. ALIA recognises this link between institutions and individual librarians in its objectives and its institutional membership category.

But in most of its day to day operations, the Association functions as an association of individuals alone. Institutions (members and non-members) contribute:

- meeting space, access to telephone and fax, postage, secretarial services, stationery;

- staff time;
- the membership fee if they are institutional members.

But what does each of the 893 institutional members get?

- One subscription each to *Australian Library Journal*, *inCite*, *ALIA Handbook* and *Biennial Conference Proceedings*;
- reduced rates for publications and some services such as conference attendance;
- spin-offs from the active participation of staff in national, State and local activities. This applies whether the institution is an institutional member or not.

ALIA owes more to its institutional members.

Institutional members do not get:

- representation on Branches, Divisions or General Council;
- a forum in which they can debate and promote their interests.

ALIA owes more to its institutional members. And if it offered more, it would have more institutions joining. We could start by approaching the 679 voucher-only

members.

What would ALIA get from more institutional members? We would get more revenue. But, more important, ALIA would clearly be seen as *the* professional body for libraries, information agencies and those who work in them.

What do we need to do? We need to:

- strengthen services to institutional members. For example, professional development and industrial information services must be directed at institutions as well as individuals. Lobbying must emphasise both institutional and individual interests.
- create a place for institutions to participate in Association affairs. Perhaps this means a new Section with the status of a Branch, that is with budget, office bearers and at least one seat on General Council.

I can hear the sigh 'Another General Councillor? Soon we won't have a room big enough. And what about the travel budget?'

Well, maybe we should be rethinking how people get into General Council. Should each State Branch gain automatic access to our senior policy-making body? Has ALIA outgrown geographical representation? This system of representation has demonstrably failed our institutional members, just as it has failed

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our non-metropolitan members.

General Council decided at its March 1991 meeting to survey samples of current and lapsed institutional members to determine the reasons for joining or failing to renew membership. That review will doubtless be interesting but it will not demonstrate that the Association is prepared to address its objects in relation to institutional members.

Here I am in Darwin, using institutional and personal time to compose this Front Line. I do it because I believe ALIA is important to my institution, and my institution is important to ALIA. But does ALIA think the same way?

To conclude where I began: Should ALIA be rethinking its relationship with institutional members — actual and potential? □

The President reports: continued from 1...

visits to:

Zhongshan University Library;
Zhongshan University Department
of Library and Information Science.

16-17 May, Shenzhen New Economic
Province:

Visit to the Shenzhen Library.

The delegation arrived in Beijing on 5 May, and was met by a party including Professor Du Ke, the Director of the Library Department of the Ministry of Culture, Chief Deputy Director of the National Library of China, and Deputy President of the Council of the China Society of Library Science. Professor Du Ke is an 'old friend' of Australian librarians, and was the principal and indispensable organiser of our Chinese itinerary. Assisting him was Yang Hongbo, Chief of the China National Microfilming Centre, who was to be our Admirable Crichton for the duration of our visit.

Yang Hongbo personified the nature of our reception; he was polite, humorous, attentive, energetic, and a master of protocol. His second name, 'Hongbo' translated as 'big wave', and he was immediately christened 'Boomer!' a title which he wore with delight. He literally and metaphorically opened the doors of China to us, and in no small measure, the success of our visit was directly attributable to his labours on our behalf.

On Monday, 6 May, we settled down to business, and paid a courtesy call on the Vice-Minister of Culture in the PRC, Liu Deyiu. Our visit lasted an hour, in the course of which our host delivered an extensive summary of the achievements of Chinese libraries and the importance attached to them by the government of the PRC. It was an erudite, informed and humane address, and outlined for us what was in store. I discovered here previously unsuspected reserves of diplomacy, since I found myself called upon to second the Director-General's response. It was a

privilege to do so, and to attempt to convey our Association's interest in the work of colleagues in China, to outline our work in Australia, and to explain the shift in our perspective from a European to an Asian and Pacific view.

This exchange set the tone for all our subsequent diplomatic encounters in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen: elaborate courtesies and the studied exchange of compliments, lubricated by the consumption of copious quantities of Jasmine tea (which early underlined the validity of the Queen Mother's apocryphal advice on what to seek out on state occasions) intermingled with the serious business of the visit.

On Tuesday, 7 May, the delegation attended a dinner at the Australian Embassy in Beijing, hosted by the Ambassador, David Sadlier; the dinner was a pleasant occasion as all such are; what was also underlined was the considerable significance of the Embassy's role during the days of June 1989. If any of us had thought that diplomacy was an occupation for the effete, this illusion was dispelled in and by the Ambassador's presence.

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Of our visits to libraries, much could be said; but within the confines of a short article for *inCite*, brevity rules and generalisations must prevail. My overall impression was of friendship, mutual and colloquial respect, and a deep interest in the ways in which Australian libraries have addressed some of the problems which confront our colleagues in China. These are clearly enormous; the tasks which loom are daunting, and the cheerfulness with which they are contemplated induces humility in the Western observer.

There were specific requests for staff and book exchanges, and there was great interest in the implications of the development of closer relations between professional bodies. The presence of ALIA President on the delegation was taken as a signal of serious interest on our part, and an indication that we would be interested in extending the connection. I have one note of caution here; we saw numerous examples of imported but dormant technology. The electronic solutions may only work well where there exists the technological and personnel infrastructure to support them.

Contrary to my misconceived view,

China is not a monolithic society; its diversity is staggering, endlessly interesting and of enormous potential to Australia. Although nominally of a socialist political cast, this does not appear to stifle enterprise: not in her libraries, nor in the wider society. In her streets, enterprise, initiative and a cheerful approach to the resolution of problems is the dominant mode. The same approach obtains in her libraries. Those Australian librarians who cleave to the philosophy that the user should pay for nothing would find a visit to the libraries, particularly the public libraries of China, enlightening. There is a ready acceptance of the view that the library should raise a proportion of its funds by enterprise, and we saw several manifestations of this philosophy, ranging from the provision of a very well-patronised bookshop in the Shenzhen Public Library, to what appeared to be a karaoke bar in the basement of a library in Shanghai.

Future relations between ALIA and colleagues in China? Very much worth putting on our International relations agenda in my view. If the membership agrees, the opportunity for us to be involved, both as an Association and individual practitioners, is considerable, and potentially very rewarding. The decision by the Australian government to invite ALIA's President to join the delegation is an indication of the possibility which exists for us to take an active role in liaison and support; there is also an opportunity for us to work closely with ACLIS in the development of exchange and assistance programs. The already considerable initiatives undertaken by the National Library of Australia offer an invaluable doorway for both ALIA and ACLIS; it is important that all three bodies work together to ensure that whatever is undertaken is done in concert and shared awareness, and to maximum effect.

One final thought; a totally unexpected benefit of the trip: the opportunity to spend uninterrupted time with a group of Australian colleagues, exchanging ideas, arguments and philosophies, and resulting in an extension of mutual respect and understanding. We/I need to do more of this. □



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