

# Front Line



John Levett  
President

clear that the technicians have now come of age, and are prepared to run as hard and as fast as possible in carving out a market segment for themselves.

*It is quite clear that the technicians have now come of age, and are prepared to run...*

This confidence has two effects on those who are not technicians; the first is pessimistic, and sees the technician as being a direct threat to professional appointments; the second view is rather more constructive, and finds its apotheosis in the arguments of Alison Crook, who asserted at the recent ELISS conference that technicians should be allowed to do whatever they are capable of in order to free professionals for work at appropriate levels. The unuttered corollary to this is that many 'librarians' may still be operating at the technician level, and should be pitched out of these niches and made to justify their existence and their salaries.

If this does occur, we can expect the debate about demarcations to heat up; this writer predicted 10 years ago that it would be the

technicians who took the initiative in demarcation matters, protesting at the filling of their jobs by professionals. Given the full-on approach of the technicians in Sydney, it will not be too long before this occurs, if it hasn't already. No doubt there will be some acrimony about this; not long ago, a library educator who had been asked to advise on task demarcation, expressed the thought that it might be better if ALIA had never invented the technician. If this line of thinking is in any way general, then it is little wonder that technicians sometimes exhibit sensitivity about the ways in which they are perceived by librarians.

For instance, it is now being said that it is not uncommon for new graduates of professional courses to apply for jobs advertised at the technician level; one assumes that they would not be successful, but in today's dollar-dominated management processes I suppose it is at least possible for this to occur. The extent to which it does is in part a matter for the employment practices of a given employer, but it might well be argued that ALIA, since it contrived the creation of the technician category, and for reasons which were and still are immensely valid, should give a lead on this. A qualified technician, graduated from an approved course, is a very different creature from a freshly-qualified professional; not superior, and certainly not inferior, just different. And different not

*continued next page...*

## 'Fine distinctions...'

I had the honour recently to attend the national Technicians' Conference in Sydney; the growing maturity and autonomy of this sector of the industry was evident and impressive. I don't know that the technicians ever thought that they were dependent on the professionals in the organisation and delivery of their conferences, but any lingering thoughts I might have had to this end were effectively demolished. From beginning to end, the conference was... professional; in its organisation, in its timetabling and in the quality of the papers presented, a majority of which were given by technicians. It is quite

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merely in degree, but in kind.

The Arts Industry Training Boards in at least two States are currently poised to begin work on the long-awaited library skills audits; it will be in the Association's interests to assist these audits to the fullest, perhaps even to assume a shaping role. The audits may contain some unpleasant surprises for us; if a significant proportion of librarians is found to be engaged in work, which by the Association's own guidelines and policy statements, is other than at a professional level, then much of the very hard work which has gone into defending the concept of librarianship as a profession will be undone overnight.

Recent debate over whether or not technicians should be involved in the answering of reference queries highlights the issue, and underlines the need for extremely careful demarcations in those situations where a technician and a librarian may be working side by side in a context which involves a mixture of task-levels. This is not merely an issue of professional snobbery, of bedpans and bedside manners; it is much more fundamental than that. If Alison Crook is

right, then in her library we would expect a clear demarcation of duties on the ground that librarians are too expensive to be used at any other than the professional level.

*librarians are too expensive to be used at any other than the professional level*

But since the user, as we know, makes no distinctions between categories in terms of those who serve in libraries, then such libraries must also make clear the *functional* differences which apply between the categories of service. The issue comes to a very sharp point indeed in relation to reference service; when the user is served from a point which contains both professionals and technicians, when the demands of shift work and lunch breaks sometimes result in a service point being staffed only by technicians, then, given the dedication (and dare I say it, the professionalism) of the latter, it is inevitable

that the technician present will endeavour to respond to a request for information, especially if the user evinces any degree of urgency in her need.

If a reference point is staffed by both professionals and technicians, each answering or receiving reference questions over the same counter, dressed similarly, speaking the same language, using the same tools, then it is hardly to be wondered at if the user is unaware of the distinctions. This blurring will continue to apply while all reference queries are given a value of one, and while they are all conducted in the same ticket-counter context.

The reference context highlights the problem; but it also exists, I would guess, in other areas, such as technical and support services. In addition, as a scanning of the *Directory of Australian Public Library Services* reveals, there are sometimes considerable differences in the balance of professionals, technicians and others between otherwise similar libraries; this raises further questions about the levels of service sought and offered, and about the relative effectiveness of the salary dollar, which is still the fattest dollar in any library's budget.

Meanwhile, the auditors, the skills auditors and others, are watching... □

*TAFE Biennial Conference continued from 1...*

problems, the O'Bahn Busway — will deliver delegates to the brand new Tea Tree Gully College of TAFE. Dubbed as the college of the 21st Century, the venue will lend itself to the exploration of the issues of lifelong learning and enterprise skills, worksite learning delivery, literacy, communication and information technologies — the solutions and issues for TAFE LRCs and libraries will be wide ranging — and an innovative venue — a joint-use library!

**Day 2: Developments in vocational education and training.** The recently released *Finn Review of Post-compulsory Education and Training* calls for greater emphasis on practical job-related training to keep teenagers in the education system. This report provides a background to the insights that Brian Stanford, Director of Adelaide College, will give us into vocational education and training and the impacts for TAFE LRC/libraries. After 12 months working in the Learning Technologies Unit of the UK Department of Employment Training Agency, and with a long commitment to quality learning resource provision, Brian's presentation will inform, challenge and provide practical directions for us all.

Union, education and industry representatives will also give us their perceptions and views, valuable context and environment information which is otherwise difficult to gain. An overview of this session will be provided by Bill Hall, Director, TAFE National Centre for Research and Development.

Cocktails provided by the Hospitality

students will ensure a lively AGM and dinner! Rest at last? ...no fear, the program continues to Day 3 starting with an (energetic?) walk and breakfast.

**Day 3: Building bridges, establishing partnerships, bringing about change.**

Professor Denise Bradley A/Vice-Chancellor of the new University of South Australia will set the theme. Denise is a distinguished librarian and educator who has been involved many times in situations demanding change.

She reminds us of the resolve and understanding needed if we are to make dreams realities for TAFE libraries in a time of contracting resources and expanding demands:

'...Accept that you may at times be unpopular. It is foolish to court people's poor opinion, but if you have strong views and are engaged in a struggle for sparse resources or changes in policy, you may find yourself a controversial figure at times...'

Bob Wilson, Campus Manager of Tea Tree Gully College will lead representatives from each State and from ALIA through this struggle and controversy as he acts as facilitator and poser of issues in the Hypothetical — *Will*



Keynote speakers Ian Lowe (left) and Brian Stanford (right)

*there be TAFE libraries in the year 2000?*

All the regular features of a national conference are also planned — displays, tours, demonstrations and meetings — lots of opportunity for the exchange of news and the meeting of colleagues.

And finally at the end of a busy program — John Levtov, National President of ALIA, who will be present throughout the conference, will respond and close the conference with his ideals and concerns about TAFE libraries and learning futures.

Are you tempted to join with colleagues who want to explore issues, raise questions and join in debate in the invigorating Adelaide spring weather from 1-3 October. Register as soon as you can. Contact Di Booker on (08) 213 0377. Cost: \$165 members, \$225 non-members. Students and persons not in employment \$80.

Chris Harrison  
National President □