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Bill Linklater has asked me to provide this guest *Front Line* on one of ALIA's identified priorities in 1994 — competency standards. He suggested the issue be outlined based on the discussion in the Specials sector.

I would like to thank Bill for this opportunity because it is always valuable to consider an issue from various perspectives.

I hope that in the following paragraphs the discussion within Specials on competency standards is clearly outlined, as this article was written well in advance of the draft standards being available. Sighting of the draft may address some of the issues raised.

The Specials sector considers the concept of competency standards to be a very good one. Competency standards are frequently the catalyst to ensure the formation of measurable accountabilities.

Such accountabilities define the role of the information provider in an organisation and remove some of the subjectivity associated with deciding if the library is providing a quality service. Therefore, Specials applauds the effort to establish measurable standards.

But when moving from a conceptual basis to a practical one a few issues have arisen, one of the important ones being how the 'new competency standards' should be interpreted in relation to existing standards established with employers.

Many Specials have successfully negotiated measurable performance standards by which they are judged either annually or in accordance with a long-

term plan. These standards are designed to objectively access the library's performance and are closely aligned with organisational goals.

The question for individuals in this situation is what do they do with, or how do they apply, the Arts Training standards.

The second, perhaps more fundamental issue, is one of paradigms. The focus of attention in a special library must be the users or the outputs. Many Specials have a concern that the competency standards may focus on the task rather than the reason for doing the task. This is not to say correct adherence to procedures is not important, it is. But a task should not be evaluated independently of its purpose.

Let's take ILL, for example. In special libraries, almost all ILLs are ordered Fast Track. The competency for a Special librarian is to know where and who provides a first-class Fast Track service. The ability to complete the necessary documentation in approved form is a means to an end.

But Specials are not the only group to demonstrate a concern regarding focus. In a recent article on competency, Robin Plummer notes the difference between Australian and United Kingdom management standards as one of focus.

According to Plummer, competencies in Australia describe the skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable effective work performance. In the United Kingdom, competencies describe the work performance that results from effectively applying these attributes.

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Another area of concern for special libraries relates to the one-person library. In a library with only one professional, they must be expert at cataloguing, reference, database management, marketing, supplier negotiations, ordering, etc.

This scenario is juxtaposed with the library with more than one information professional, where it can be agreed that specific individuals focus on different tasks, thereby increasing their competency in that area.

One-person librarians are concerned at how their competency will be judged and probably consider the fact that they can operate one-person libraries as testimony of their abilities.

An area of lively discussion within and beyond Specials is the development of the standards by a group with the title 'Arts'. It is acknowledged that one group must have the authority for setting standards but it must be recognised that librarians operate in a broad spectrum of the knowledge base.

This spectrum ranges from a recreational pursuit at a public library to a decision-support information network at an atomic reactor. Any standards that do not cover this breadth of activity will not adequately meet the requirements of the profession.

Many of these issues will be addressed when the profession gets an opportunity to comment on the draft standards. As for Specials, we warmly welcome any developments that will assist in objectively measuring the value of the information profession to our customers; and offer our assistance to the development of the standards. ■