

The loneliness of the long-distance LT

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All residents of rural areas in Australia are familiar with isolation to varying degrees. Library technicians in country libraries are not strangers to the experience of the tyranny of distance.

Once the decision is made to pursue a career as a library technician, those lucky (?) enough to reside in country areas have enormous time and distance problems to overcome.

In the past, the external course was only available through Adelaide TAFE. This course is now only offered to South Australian and Northern Territory students.

All other aspiring library technicians must enrol with Edith Cowan University in Perth. Not only is this geographically isolating for its students but there is the problem of a different time zone as well.

Thankfully, educators have acknowledged these difficulties and have implemented ways to help minimise the isolation and lack of communication opportunities. For example, teleconferencing between lecturer and students; the virtual campus — a computer based system providing students with the electronic equivalent of on-campus facilities; a geographical list of names and addresses of students residing in a particular area — which facilitates student to student contact; lecturer's work and home telephone numbers, fax, e-mail and answering service which improve contact opportunities; and, course videos and tapes of lecturers sent to students.

I am confident that one of the great beneficiaries of tomorrow's technology will be the remote student, no longer as isolated by distance or communication difficulties. Once one has graduated the isolation continues as personal development and training courses are primarily held in city areas. This could entail a three to four hour car trip and if the course commences at 9am, an overnight stay is probably also necessary. Then a three to four hour return trip — all of

which is very time consuming and costly. The alternative is to fly to the city but the costs can be prohibitive to smaller country libraries with tight budgets.

For those library technicians living in or near larger country towns, a support group can be formed where encouragement and assistance can help overcome the isolation factor. Technicians in two country cities, Bathurst and Lismore, have each formed such groups. The Bathurst group commenced in 1991 with five technicians. This group has now grown to 13. The Lismore group commenced this year as a result of the inspiration gained at the Adelaide conference. Both groups find this interaction with others can alleviate the feeling

that you are out there on your own.

Involvement in regional ALIA is another way of meeting with other staff from libraries spread around country areas. Its also a medium for keeping up-to-date with the vital issues relevant, not only to technicians, but with broader library workplace implications.

Technology may also be the saviour of the library technician or, perhaps, as more libraries prescribe the Associate Diploma as a desired pre-requisite for employment it may be possible to offer professional development in situ or, at least in more convenient locations.

We can only hope. ■

State of the art information service to link nation's libraries

The National Library of Australia will introduce a new National Document and Information Service (NDIS) which will link users of Australia's libraries to New Zealand and the rest of the world, the Minister for Communications and the Arts, Michael Lee, announced.

The NDIS will be a leading edge system for on-line access to material in libraries throughout Australia, with gateways to overseas services. It will be developed in co-operation with the National Library of New Zealand on a partnership basis and marketed to users in both countries.

'This project presents an exciting opportunity for the National Library and the Australian library community to exploit recent advances in technology and take advantage of the development of the Internet and related broadband services. It also provides an opportunity for a dynamic partnership between Australian and New Zealand government agencies with similar objectives' Mr Lee said.

The NDIS project will replace older systems such as the Australian Bibliographic Network (ABN)

and other bibliographic and database services. This venture will provide a user friendly system which will make it possible for a greater number of Australians to gain access to a wider range of information services.

Users of the new system will include libraries, the corporate sector, institutions such as hospitals and schools, and individuals who need information not available locally. Anyone with online access will be able to search NDIS to identify and locate books, journal articles and other documents. The system will allow quick and easy access to information and facilitate fast delivery of material either in printed or electronic form.

The national libraries of Australia and New Zealand will be entering into negotiations with CSC Australia (formerly Computer Sciences of Australia) as the preferred vendor for the NDIS project. CSC is a major systems integration and software development company, and is a member of the Australian Government's Systems Integration Panel.

The new service is scheduled for delivery by 1996. ■