

Representing the library industry

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It is frequently observed that we are in a period of rapid and dramatic change in the library and information sector. The capabilities of new technology and vastly expanding and more rapidly accessible information provide exciting opportunities but they also stretch resources of funding, time and skills to their limit.

In this period of such white-water change our national cross-sectoral co-ordination must also reinvent its role in a highly competitive environment. National bodies must expect that libraries and librarians will support and pay for only those services they require and will be highly selective in their needs.

Our profession was saying to us that we are all very hard pressed within our own organisations, our local or regional groups and contributing at a broader level. We cannot afford to duplicate effort within or across the industry. Already we had seen the emergence of joint ACLIS/ALIA meetings, joint seminars and joint representation to major committees of advice and review. At the national level some attempt had been made to share resources and joint executive meetings had been held to discuss national agenda issues. However separate initiatives were covering a number of common areas. The profession strongly believes that we are not representing ourselves as best we can while our energies are being duplicated and dissipated and we are creating confusion at government level with two separate entities representing our interests, no matter how well this may have been achieved. Costs will be too high unless we achieve one level of operation and changing needs in the profession require different skills and different advice from that provided by our two organisations funded separately. We know that increasing membership fees would simply drive members away. In such a resource constrained environment consolidation and redirection of resources is essential to address these critical issues.

Some members felt that there is only a need for single sector organisations such as CAUL and FLIN. These groups will undoubtedly continue to survive and thrive where collaboration and co-operative effort brings mutual benefit, however the need for one cross-sectoral organisation is high. Information industry issues are cross-sectoral at the strategic level such as telecommunications, copyright, quality management, benchmarking, competency standards and education to name a few.

We all have less time to address national issues which will be critical to determining our own future. It has never been so necessary to have a strong organisation with access to skilled

and knowledgeable people in the industry and beyond, to help us support our current and future needs.

Goals identified in the report (p27 and 28) are: improving service delivery to members; defining the distinctive services and skills of the profession into the next century; assisting members to operate effectively in the transition from the industrial to the information age; providing mechanisms where the members can participate and share in activities of the body, with the focus on achieving specific benefits; influencing governments by active policy development; representing its members to the community; developing strategic alliances with other interest groups; and being accountable and efficient.

Issues to be dealt with by a united body include: education and training, including continuing education; accreditation of library courses; industrial relations advisory services; co-ordination, preservation and dissemination of data; policy issues including copyright; professional ethics; and the impact of de-institutionalization on individuals.

The most important need for library representation and advocacy was mentioned many times in submissions and meetings and presents the most difficulty for any individual or single institution to achieve.

The redesigned organisation which is based on ALIA would also address the issues that arise from the fifty-seven submissions and the oral discussions which provide clear indicators of new opportunities and gaps in national co-ordination which need to be addressed. 'The establishment of a single peak body will not address the shortcomings of existing representation, but will well equip such a body to represent the interests of the library industry and the profession into the next century'. (Review Executive Summary)

The submissions noted that there have been some differences of principle between the two organisations. Examples quoted were the perception of ALIA's role in industrial relations, and the longstanding debate on restating or redefining the principle of free access to public library services. There is consensus that these issues can be reconciled and only represent 'shades of grey' on these issues.

There is no doubt in our minds that if the review does not result in significant change we will have disappointed the library community. Improved delivery of national co-ordinated services is the goal we must achieve. This has received overwhelming support from the library and information services sectors. The consultant states

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'given the enormous amount of goodwill expressed across Australia, this goal should be pursued as quickly as possible'.

What is needed at this point is that we do not place national co-ordination on hold while administrative arrangements are worked through. Copyright issues are at the height of a review process and rigorous monitoring and advice must be given throughout this process. The need to provide small libraries with advocacy tools is also critical when competition and efficiency measures are driving organisations and government agencies to reconsider their information requirements. Individuals are seeking continuing support and improvement in education and professional development. We must therefore, more vigorously than ever, continue to support the important work which is being achieved while necessary restructuring takes place.

Where do we go from here?

A summary of the report's findings and recommendations appears elsewhere in this issue and

the full report can be seen on the National Library of Australia's website at <http://www.nla.gov.au/>, or via ALIANet at <http://www.alia.org.au/>.

On page 6 of this issue the next steps and the recommendations to go to the two national councils this month are set out. We believe that the steps and time frame proposed balance the need for a rapid and comprehensive response to the clear expression of the wishes of our members with the need for care and a measured approach to ensure the best possible organisation for the future.

As members of the review steering committee we are heartened by the clarity of the mandate and very conscious of this great opportunity to 'get it right' in developing a new body. Getting it right for us means aiming for simplicity, flexibility and an ability to focus resources on the key roles and issues defined by members, not dissipating them in complex procedures and structures. We look forward to rich ideas and lively debate. ■

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