

## Researching the library labour market



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Recent events provide further evidence that a centralised labour market is a thing of the past. The release of wage outcomes for calendar year 1996 showed enormous diversity, both between and within different industry sectors. Published employer expectations revealed similarly wide differences in recruitment intentions. And to really confirm the emergence of a new decentralised paradigm, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission's Full Bench refused to ratify a proposed national award wage increase agreed between major employers and unions in the transport sector. The increase would, according to the Full Bench, have compromised the swing to local enterprise-based wage-fixation as envisaged by the Federal Government's new Workplace Relations Act.

In this environment it is clear there will be a continuation and broadening of the labour market trends recently discussed in this column. Wage settlements will vary far more than previously, and both expansion and contraction of employment may occur simultaneously. As we have said in a number of forums: where people work will increasingly be as important as what they work as.

In developing strategies to deal with this, the Association is keen to acquire as much information on emerging conditions as possible. This will be vital if we are to help members confront effectively the changes which are now occurring. With that aim, ALIA has commissioned a major research project from which we hope to gain a more detailed picture of the current employment experience of library and information workers in Australia. To be known as *The library labour market survey*, the project will be conducted by the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT) in conjunction with ALIA. It will commence in early July and we expect ACIRRT to finalise a report of its findings before the end of September 1997.

ACIRRT is Australia's major research organisation in the industrial relations field. Located at Sydney University, it is an independent, multi-disciplinary body which is recognised by the Australian Research Council as a National Key Centre. It has strong formal links with business, governments, trade unions and the academic community. It maintains by far the most comprehensive data bases on enterprise agreements and their outcomes available in Australia. Much of the national media coverage of labour market issues stems directly from ACIRRT's research and reports. And the Centre's senior staff are among the country's best-known and respected commentators.

The project will be supervised by ACIRRT's

deputy director John Buchanan, who many members will have seen in his various television appearances. I will provide support from ALIA National Office. Using ALIA's membership database and a range of other sources, the project will involve two surveys, of both employer and employee experiences. Sample groups will be established to explore the work experience of librarians, technicians and library assistants, and will be designed to allow for reporting on the situation in different states and locations. Comparisons across federal, state and local government, and between public and private sectors are envisaged. There will be some use of focus groups to identify key issues for investigation. And a small pilot survey in the Sydney region may be used to ensure sampling techniques are valid. We expect to involve various ALIA office holders in developing and piloting the survey.

Among topics the project will deal with are: *on employment levels* — recent and anticipated changes to employment levels, including in the mix of employment categories, issues surrounding part time work and the incidence of casual work; *on employment regulation* — industrial coverage, including the proportion of staff covered by awards, agreements, individual contracts and various combinations of these, the extent and effect of union membership, current rates of pay and classification and qualifications issues; *on employment practices* — the extent of restructuring and redundancy, flexibility in working arrangements, including penalty rates, and work and family aspects.

This is a sizeable agenda. But it is at the heart of ALIA members' current concerns about their jobs.

The Association believes it is critically important that a clearer picture emerges of just what is happening in the great variety of settings in which library and information workers are located. Too often developments in one area are assumed to be occurring everywhere. This is rarely the case, and in future it will be even less so in the climate which will prevail.

As well as enhancing ALIA National Office's capacity to provide direct assistance to members, we are hopeful that the information gathered through this Project can also form the basis for development of materials which members can use themselves when they are involved in local negotiations. And the profile of conditions and expectations which is established will be a meaningful reference point for monitoring the many further changes which are almost certain to occur over the next few years.

Members who want further information on *The library labour markets survey* can contact me at ALIA National Office. ■