



Conference delegates, Melanie Fairbaine and Dianne Harrison at the TAFE conference dinner

Creative partnerships

Marilyn Hart, national president, ALIA TAFE section

The Sixth ALIA TAFE National Conference held in Sydney during August was special in many ways. For example, I was struck by the number of delegates from non-TAFE sectors — specials, public, school, and university libraries were all represented, and the list also included open-learning institutions, library suppliers and private enterprises. Moreover, teaching staff and educational administrators within TAFE were amongst the attendees. Almost certainly this reflected the broad appeal of the conference theme, *Partnerships in learning: the creative strategy*.

Throughout the conference, whether in the papers of keynote speakers or in the more practically-focussed concurrent sessions, it became clear that a great deal of productive work had already taken place in the TAFE sector to ensure that the best possible outcomes are achieved for TAFE customers through a wide range of partnerships. However, one of the most valuable aspects of the conference was the consideration of all kinds of new and emerging possibilities for collaboration, within the competitive training market which now characterises the vocational education and training sector.

Gaye Hart, director of the Hunter Institute of Technology, one of the largest TAFE Institutes in New South Wales, skilfully set the scene for the conference by challenging TAFE libraries to position themselves very firmly within an educational framework and to enunciate their contribution within an educational paradigm. This theme was re-emphasised by Dr Gary Willmott, assistant director general, Education and Training Services, New South Wales Department of Training and Education Co-ordination who reminded us that the sector is increasingly 'industry-driven', operating in a deregulated open training market and that

libraries needed to rethink their position in this environment, including the possibility of developing commercial services. Neil McLean, Macquarie University librarian, provided a number of concrete examples of partnerships between the library and faculty, which highlighted the value of structured and regular consultation within the context of service-level agreements. I also found salutary Neil's advice that partnerships may sometimes be characterised by a very long courtship!

Overall, one of the conference's strengths was that there was a good balance between the 'big picture' and discussion of specific partnership initiatives. The collaboration between teaching staff and library staff at RMIT in the development of online courses and the approach to information literacy at Sydney Institute of Technology provided much food for thought, as did the many cross-sectoral and internal partnerships which were discussed.

One of the conferences other strengths was the quality of its social program, which included a welcome reception in the historic Mitchell Galleries of the State Library of New South Wales, against the backdrop of a Max Dupain Exhibition, dinner at the Museum of Contemporary Art overlooking the Sydney Harbour and a champagne finale to celebrate the launch of VOCED (Vocational Training and Education Database) on the Web. These occasions provided not just conviviality but lots of opportunity for networking with colleagues both within and beyond TAFE.

Participant evaluation indicates that as a professional development opportunity the conference was highly-rated. I suspect its impact in terms of the development of creative partnerships will be felt well into the future.

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