

A vision for the future...

The ALIA-ACLIS leadership committee was formed in September 1997 following the signing of the memorandum of understanding between the two organisations. The committee, which comprises three members of the ALIA General Council, and three members of the ACLIS National Council, is charged with the task of directing the establishment of the library and information sector's new peak body.

This month, ALIA president and university librarian, John Shipp, gives us his vision of the new organisation. Next month, Derek Whitehead, ACLIS president and deputy state librarian, will provide *inCite* readers with his views on the 'way forward'.

inCite: What is the leadership committee's major function?

John Shipp: The committee was established to provide the general direction and vision for the new association. None of the members claim any gift of second sight, super intelligence or other special attribute. Most of us have been around for a long time — perhaps too long — and have a fair idea about how both ACLIS and ALIA have operated and the likely challenges of the future.

inCite: What progress has it made in achieving its goals?

JS: In many ways, progress has been quite remarkable. Members of the committee focused quickly on the future and concentrated on what the library and information sector will need in the coming years. There have been some lingering loyalties to ACLIS and ALIA but in general, the committee has tried to consider what will be best for individuals, institutions and for the sector as a whole.

The difficulty has been balancing the roles of individuals and institutions. The committee is also aware that there are many views on what sort of organisation is needed. In its discussions, the committee has considered many of those opinions and has tried to accommodate them. Above all, we are aware that we have been charged with providing leadership and vision. We are also sensitive to the need to move as quickly as possible so that we can begin building the future. Consequently, wide consultation with members is not possible, although there will be some opportunities early in 1998. Inevitably, the recommendations of the committee will not suit everyone nor will they be exhaustive.

What is important is that we establish the foundations and general directions of the new organisation and get them in place. The finer details can be developed over time. After all,

any vibrant organisation should be adapting constantly to its environment.

inCite: What will be the benefits to members belonging to the new organisation?

JS: It depends who is defined as a member. Although ALIA has always had institutional members, they have not played a dominant role nor have they sought special services other than the interlibrary loan vouchers. The reverse is true of ACLIS, which is an association of institutions. Bringing together these cultures is a major challenge.

The new association provides an excellent opportunity to re-assess services to all classes of members and the way in which those services are delivered. The committee has given a lot of thought to various models ranging from the central delivery of services from the national office to more decentralised approaches which might be based on state and territory branches. The eventual outcome is likely to be a mix since some activities are best co-ordinated and provided centrally while others will benefit from more local provision. During its deliberations, the committee has been keen to find ways of strengthening service support and making it as relevant as possible to members.

With one organisation representing the library and information sector, our lobbying campaigns will be more focused. At present, key policy makers are often confused by the subtle difference between ACLIS and ALIA. The committee is also considering ways in which stronger alliances can be developed with related organisations such as the Council of Australian University Librarians and the Australian School Librarians' Association.

inCite: What is the major goal/mission of the new organisation?

JS: To represent the interests of individuals and institutions involved in the Australian library and information sector. This involves the provision of basic services such as industrial advice, accrediting educational qualifications as well as providing continuing education programs. It also involves promoting libraries and information services in the wider Australian community. We need to project an image which portrays libraries and librarians as dynamic, educationally and economically relevant and indispensable to Australian life. This will require the association to develop alliances throughout the national and international communities.

inCite: How will this new organisation work? (for example, what will its Council, national office and state branch structures comprise?)

JS: As yet, there is no consensus among members of the leadership committee. I favour a model which devolves as much decision making and service provision as possible to the membership. In my mind, I see state, territory and regional branches operating much as they do now in ALIA but with more resources for supporting their activities.

At the national level, I see a continuing role for the national office as the majority of services are most effectively provided as national services. Therein, of course, is a major challenge. How do we maintain the level of services currently provided by national office while increasing resources available at the local level?

The leadership committee has had only brief discussions about the financial structure of the new organisation. At some stage, all services and activities will need to be assessed and their priorities determined. The new association will need to find new funding avenues as it is clear that there is likely to be resistance to higher fees. In the end, however, members will have to decide what services they want and how much they are prepared to pay for them.

As for the governance of the association, I favour a representative national council which sets policies and strategic directions. The council would meet perhaps twice each year and most of its work would be undertaken either by branches, divisions, special interest groups or committees. A small executive group would monitor activities between council meetings. The routine operation of the association would be undertaken by the national office under the direction of the executive director.

It is clear to me that there needs to be a change in the culture which has developed in ALIA whereby every major decision is discussed and rediscussed by general council and the branch councils until it is either compromised into irrelevancy or is overtaken by time. If the new organisation is to be effective, it needs to be able to react quickly to events and to trust its elected representatives to act responsibly.

inCite: How will the new organisation effectively represent both individual and institutional members?

JS: I think that this is largely a red herring although there may be some delicate issues. The new association will need to develop a tradition whereby it treats institutions as if they were individuals. Just as it would not make adverse public comment on the activities of an individual, so it would not comment

► on an institution. This would be so irrespective of whether or not they are members.

In terms of institutions being represented in the governance, the future is less clear. Although a single institution may pay a larger membership fee than any individual, this should not entitle institutions to any special rights in terms of the governance of the association. Institutions will have the right to nominate a representative, who may stand for any office, and to cast a vote in any election. I believe that it will be impractical to have special representation for institutions. In any case, I believe members will vote in recognition of the abilities of an individual rather than the employing organisation.

When all is said and done, both institutions and individuals have a common interest — the well-being of the library and information sector. In general, institutions will be represented by individuals who are members of the association and who support its objectives. Other organisations include both institutional and individual members and operate

effectively. There is no reason to believe that our new association can not do the same.

One interesting outcome of allowing institutional representatives to stand for office is that at some time in the future we may well have as president someone who does not have library qualifications. This will not be a first as during its history, the antecedents of ALIA had several non-librarians as president. The world continued to revolve nonetheless.

While considering this occurrence, I also thought about the types of membership which the new association might have. Increasingly, I believe that there should be just two general classes of individual membership — members and associates. People who possess no accredited educational qualification, but who support the objectives of the association could join as members. Individuals with an accredited qualification would join as associates and be entitled to use the post-nominals to indicate that they are associates of the association.

Given the changes which are occurring in post-secondary education and in the information industry, the new association should recognise a wide range of qualifications for associateship. These would include the present library technician diplomas, specialised library degrees and diplomas as well as qualifications which have a broader focus on information content and its use. The new association needs to recognise that the information and industrial environments are changing rapidly. If these changes are not accommodated, the new association will be superseded before it begins. Developing a new organisation is probably harder than changing an existing one. We won't get it completely right at the beginning but it won't be for lack of effort and goodwill. It is essential however, that we build anew rather than tinker with the existing structures of ACLIS and ALIA.

I look forward to meeting as many members as possible during 1998 when members of the leadership committee visit the states and territories to discuss the new organisation. ■

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