

# Deserving librarians

Following announcement of the NSW Pay Equity test case decision in which librarians won unprecedented pay rises, a number of ill-informed and critical articles appeared in the media. The most significant, and most disturbing, was an editorial in *Quadrant* magazine, which describes itself as 'Australia's leading intellectual monthly'.

In its September edition ALIA's response to this editorial is published in full under the heading 'Deserving librarians'. The article is reproduced below:

*Editorials are an exercise in pomposity at the best of times. But given their usual here-is-the-verdict-from-the-font-of-all-wisdom tone, those who compile them might at least try to get the facts right. Your June effort on the subject of pay rises for New South Wales librarians is replete with patronising comments about them but blessed with very little understanding of the Industrial Relations Commission decision which granted them long-overdue wage improvements.*

*Leaving aside the absence of real argument to support most of its assertions, the editorial's major failing is simply that it is wrong. Three examples will suffice. First, you state that wage increases granted to librarians were 'based on ... an invalid comparison ... with geologists'. The full bench reviewed comparisons with, among others, psychologists, teachers, scientific officers, legal officers, geologists, engineers, administrative and clerical staff. In doing so, the bench made it clear that such comparison were not made on the basis that librarians' work per se was of equal value to that of those other categories. What comparison did establish, however, was that only the work of librarians had not been assessed for changing work value over the past twenty years.*

*Second, you assert that 'the real issue is the absurd notion that work in female-dominated industries is historically undervalued'. Space obviously precludes my dealing fully with this remarkable observation. But tell that to successive generations of women and see what reaction you get. For present purposes, Justice Mary Gaudron's well-known observation covers the point well: 'We got equal pay once, then we got it again and now we still don't have it.'*

*Third, you claim that 'in the case of libraries it is historically untrue that it was mainly a female profession' that 'it is only in the past twenty years or so that women have come to dominate the profession'; that 'there is no evidence that salaries have been driven down by women entering it'. In the New South Wales case, evidence put before the Pay Equity Inquiry confirmed that as long ago as 1930 there was eighty-five per cent female employment in the State Library, but*

*largely unqualified men held the senior positions. Those men enjoyed salaries on par with other professionals across the public sector. It was only when more women gained senior positions that relativities declined. Further evidence showed that in 1955, eighty-three per cent of female librarians held tertiary qualifications compared with only sixty per cent of men. Yet female librarians' pay was lower than that of their male counterparts and was falling relative to other professions with which librarianship had previously had parity. For your information, what actually happened was that as women came to dominate the librarian workforce, qualification levels increased but relative pay fell.*

*Finally, you simplistically (and ideologically) observe that 'since libraries are chiefly a matter of public sector employment, there is no appropriate basis for market comparisons. Any other form of evaluation of [the] value of work must be based on non-economic considerations, and hence must be irrelevant to wage comparisons'. The many well-known national and international companies conducting comprehensive job evaluations for private and public organisations will doubtless be interested to find their systems are irrelevant. Their measurement of value goes far beyond mere replications of the accidents (and inequities) or historical wage fixation which your 'market-only' bias suggests. And just as well too. In any event, the canvas for the full bench consideration of this case was the whole of public sector employment in New South Wales. Is that not a market too, within which there should be consistent and fair relatives, based on assessment of work value?*

*There has been in recent years and unfortunate tendency for politicians, broadcasters and commentators to lead an assault on judgments made by courts, tribunals and similar bodies. It is presumably an enjoyable self-indulgence. There is nothing wrong with public criticism, but those who foment it should accept a responsibility to refrain from doing so until they have read in its entirety the evidence upon which decisions are made. In this case, a major judicial Pay Equity Inquiry investigates librarians' pay (as well as that of several non-professional categories, for your information). The ensuing report was lengthy and extremely detailed. Flowing from that inquiry came the text case under discussion. Transcript from that case runs to hundreds of pages. The judgment itself is of more than fifty pages. Unless they are made after close reading of at least a substantial part of this material, comments on the decision are inevitable going to be superficial and ill-informed. Your editorial demonstrates that fact perfectly. ■*



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