

Your voice

The future for public librarianship

Recently I represented VICLINK (the peak organisation for Victorian public library managers) on a panel to select the winner of the Thomas Woodrow Trust Award.

This is an annual award, consisting of a medal and some cash, in memory of an eminent public librarian who managed the Camberwell and later Camberwell-Waverley library services.

The terms of the award are that it is presented to one or more outstanding librarianship students from RMIT — which is the main provider of training for the library and information industry in Victoria. As public libraries were the field in which Tom Woodrow worked, it is generally understood that it is appropriate to award it to students with a particular interest in this field.

This year the panel was not able to recommend a winner for reasons which I find disturbing.

Four very fine young people were nominated by RMIT staff and were interviewed. None showed any real interest in or knowledge of public libraries and the issues faced by them. Although some had worked in public libraries on a casual basis while studying, all seemed to believe that the corporate sector was the only one in which to make their career. Their course had apparently given them no training for or information about one of the largest areas of employment for information professionals.

The observations of the panel in this regard are consistent with frequent complaints from public library managers about the difficulty of attracting quality applications for professional positions. One manager reported that he received an overwhelming number of excellent applications for an information technology position but no suitable applications at all for a children's librarian position advertised at the same time.

It seems that tertiary institutions are no longer producing graduates with the skills and enthusiasm we require in public libraries.

Public libraries are a key element of the library and information sector. They are used on a regular basis by a significant proportion of the Australian population. For most people they are the first port of call for information and for information technology. They are the only libraries available to all — regardless of age, income, and language. For many people they are the only way to access online information.

The professional staff are the most important resource for public libraries as they are essential to organise information and assist people to access it. It would be disastrous for public libraries if suitable staff are no longer being trained and this should be an issue of grave concern for our profession.

Elisabeth Jackson, secretary VICLINK

RMIT responds... It would seem that there are two main issues to be addressed in the letter from Elisabeth Jackson. First, the awarding of the Woodrow Award and secondly, the wider questions of the provision of a workforce for public libraries and nature of the programs offered at RMIT and other tertiary institutions.

Addressing the issue of the Thomas Woodrow Award, Ms Jackson asserts that it is 'generally understood' that it should be awarded to students with a particular interest in public libraries. Each year a letter is sent to RMIT asking for nominations. The terms of the award detailed in that letter are that nomination for the award is to be made from students who have completed '...the first stage and not the final stage of their course as it is the intention of the Award to assist an outstanding student...' The letter goes on to state, 'To assist the judges in making their decisions the Trust requests that each nominee write one

page of information about their attitudes towards and interest in librarianship and information services.' No mention is made of public libraries anywhere in the letter. In the one page description of the Thomas Woodrow Memorial Trust accompanying the letter it states, '... an award of money together with an inscribed medallion is given each year to one or more outstanding students from [RMIT]' While it may be Elisabeth Jackson's understanding, it is not specified in the award invitation nor the Trust documentation, and has not been communicated to RMIT by any other means, that somehow this award belongs specifically to public library aspirants. Our experience in the past is that the award has been given to outstanding students who have moved into a diverse range of librarianship and information services areas.

There would seem to be a number of strands to Elisabeth's concerns. She assumes that because the four students put up by RMIT this year did not have a particular interest in public libraries that somehow this is evidence of a program that gives 'no training for or information about' public libraries. A sample of four students from one year of a program is hardly a valid basis on which to make such a claim. For instance, of the students who were nominated by RMIT for the Woodrow Award in the previous year (2001), two are now working in public libraries. One of these students was the winner of the Woodrow Award and the other was the top-ranking student by academic results in the year.

Another implication that Elisabeth Jackson seems to be making is that the tertiary institutions are somehow responsible for enthusing their graduates for particular sectors of the industry. We do not accept that suggestion. We train for information management careers generally. We need to be aware of the needs and skills of the whole of an industry that is now large and

varied. Up until 10 to 15 years ago the archival, librarianship and records professions were largely the only professions that dealt with the organisation and provision of recorded information as the main focus of their day-to-day work. That is now not the case. We offer an education that is broadly based in information management but also allows for specialisation in later years of the program. The library sector is only one of the many that we train for and public libraries are one component of that sector. We see our responsibility in making students aware of the full range of employment possibilities open to them and having a realistic picture of the nature of work in those possibilities. It is then up to the students where they wish to direct their energies in terms of specialising for any particular sector. The economic reality for most of our students suggests that if starting wages in any sector are comparatively low, as they are in the public library sector, then this is one factor the students will consider amongst many others, especially now that they have the burden of HECS debts to repay. Increasingly our students follow careers that reflect the variety of options that are now available to our graduates. If public libraries wish to be able to more easily find employees then it is up to public libraries to market themselves as an attractive option for our graduates amongst all the other options now available to skilled information managers. We are more than happy to facilitate opportunities for such marketing, as we have always done in the past.

Henric Beiers and Associate Professor Kevin Adams, School of Business Information Technology, RMIT

More on the NSW Parliamentary Library

It appears in the latest issue of *inCite* that Mr Brian, the NSW parliamentary librarian, has picked out some errors as stated in the *Australian* article from 14 February 2003 which

many librarians have read with great concern. In good faith we can assume what he states is true.

However this ignores many of the other issues discussed in the same *Australian* article concerning the sale of books from the parliament library. While SLNSW may have been given 597 titles prior to 2000 it certainly has not been offered any titles since late 2000 after which date 2500 titles (over \$500 000 worth) were sold directly to private overseas bookdealers by Mr Brian without ever being offered to any Australian public institutions. In fact titles SLNSW wanted were sold by Mr Brian. Amongst other things the *Australian* article refers to a \$90 000 discount given to a German bookdealer, credit of \$191 000 being given to one bookdealer and bookdealers loading books into boxes unsupervised. None of these issues were addressed by Mr Brian in his letter to *inCite*.

Maybe *inCite* should ask Mr Brian for a copy of the Heagney report and his response

as referred to in both the *Australian* and his letter.

A concerned librarian

Rob Brian responds...

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to respond to 'A concerned librarian'. It always worries me when people do not have the courage of their convictions to say who they are. It was a similar cowardly accusation made under the *Protected Disclosures Act 1994* [NSW] that led to the Heagney Inquiry and subsequent report. That 83-page report has not been made public and it is not up to me to do so, although I would be very happy for it to be made public, provided my detailed 66-page response to it is also made public at the same time. However, until the matter has been resolved, preferably in-house, it is not possible to do so. Suffice it to point out that on 29 August 2000 SLNSW stated in an e-mail to me: 'We will not be reviewing any further lists'. At all times it was intended that SLNSW should have first refusal, but they found increasingly that they had all the books we were

offering them. Mr Heagney's other criticisms of me are fully answered in my response.

It would be interesting to know how other libraries dispose of books that they no longer want. The NSW Parliamentary Library is surely not the only library that needs to cull its collections from time to time. Is it better to keep books that no one has ever read, and no client of the library is ever likely to read, on overcrowded shelves in a basement or to liquidate a very small proportion of these 'assets' in order to raise the resources necessary to catalogue and preserve the rest for posterity? Would it be better to just give away books that do not fall within the library's collection development policy or to pulp them or bury them [as some libraries have been known to do]? Would that be responsible? I would have had an easier life certainly if I had done nothing and simply retired in 1998, not caring about the library's space problems, deteriorating rare books and electoral maps, and leaving the bulk of the collection not properly catalogued. We set our

goals and we were a long way towards achieving them, when people with other agendas intervened under the cowardly cloak of anonymity. I have not looked for controversy, but I am not afraid of it either. I know that I have done my best for the Parliament of NSW and the results are there for all to see.

I am always happy to debate library issues with my fellow librarians, but I would have hoped that my professional colleagues would, at least, ascertain the facts rather than rely on the 'gosh! horror!' hype of a sensational newspaper article before jumping to conclusions.

Rob Brian, NSW Parliamentary librarian

Your letters on any issue of relevance to the library and information sector are welcomed.

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