

Volunteering in Vanuatu

Kylie Moloney, acting Kinetica customer service manager, National Library of Australia

I imagine sleeping on the library tables at lunchtime, spending hours cleaning gecko droppings off shelves and flying in a twelve-seater plane to a remote island, then sitting in the back of a ute on a muddy road for more than five hours to deliver library training to people who had never heard of Dewey!

In March 2004 I began work as an Australian Youth Ambassador volunteer librarian at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT). The AYAD program (<http://www.aisaid.gov.au/youtham/>) places skilled young Australian volunteers aged 18–30 on short-term assignments in developing countries throughout Asia and the Pacific.

Located in the South Pacific, Vanuatu is made up of over 83 islands. From 1906 until 1980 Vanuatu operated under an Anglo-French condominium. Achieving independence in 1980, the Republic of Vanuatu is classed as a developing country, heavily influenced by external events including commodity prices, foreign aid inflows and tourist arrivals.

When I arrived, the VIT library was staffed by one untrained person — my colleague Gina. Gina was also the 'school photocopier' and, because resources are rare in Vanuatu, approximately 90 per cent of her time was taken up by photocopying. The library was located in a small room with about 7000 books. Because of the dual-language system within VIT, many of the books were in French as well as English.

The library had no budget and relied solely on donations. Most of the books were old and irrelevant. There was no catalogue or internet access, making acquisitions and research difficult. Students and teachers used the library for private study and photocopying. Very few of the books were borrowed and students rarely came to the librarian to ask for help.

My job involved assisting the librarian with her studies in librarianship, planning the move to a new library, identifying and selecting new resources, implementing a catalogue system, promoting the library within VIT and working with other community librarians to enhance their skills. I was able to employ an assistant to relieve the librarian from her photocopying duties, sort and organise resources, purchase and install a dual-language library catalogue with both a French and English interface, purchase new books and stationery, purchase and install eight new computers, a server, printer and scanners, and purchase wood and other materials to build furniture for the new library. I sorted the collection into Dewey, trained the librarian and assistant in library management and organisation skills, contributed to a new understanding of how a library can benefit VIT teachers and students, and travelled to remote islands transferring my knowledge and skills.

Libraries in Vanuatu, and other developing countries, face issues such as lack of funding, resources and infrastructure; lack of skilled professionals to operate and manage libraries (to study the basic librarianship course at the University of the South Pacific costs around \$350 per subject, and the average wage of a librarian in Vanuatu is \$80 per week); difficulties in accessing appropriate and relevant information resources; the availability but slow uptake of modern technologies due to lack of skill, infrastructure and cost; low literacy levels making printed information inaccessible to many people; difficulties in acquiring relevant and up-to-date locally produced resources; financial constraints; macro-environmental effects such as politics and the environment; and a general lack of management, strategic direction and co-ordination.



Kylie Moloney with library staff at the opening of the new VIT library

The majority of libraries in Vanuatu have little or no budget and rely solely on aid donations that are often irrelevant and out of date. Many of the islands in Vanuatu do not have telephone connections and/or electricity. Because the majority of librarians are untrained, the standards of librarianship are relatively low. The quality of cataloguing is poor and the lack of an understanding of the role of the librarian is restricting the progress of libraries there.

Developing countries need not only donations of relevant books, but also trained librarians who can transfer skills and operate libraries with professional knowledge and practicality. Working in libraries in developing countries requires knowledge of the basic skills of librarianship such as organising information, educating people in how to use information, and developing circulation systems, storage and conservation.

Although it is unlikely that political stability and transparency in Vanuatu will be achieved in the short to medium term, the establishment of information centres is an important step towards the formation of long-term sustainable development strategies. The role of the VIT library continues to develop and is not merely a resource centre for books.

We should not forget the very important social and communal role of libraries. Libraries can improve people's quality of life. Well-informed citizens can play an active role in society and exercise democratic rights making the necessary decisions to govern themselves. Effective and timely use of relevant information can contribute to development efforts such as reducing poverty, increasing productivity, improving governance and natural resource management, and increasing effective participation.

If you would like to donate books to Vanuatu, please contact Kylie Moloney at kmoloney@nla.gov.au.

Roundtable on open access

The National Scholarly Communications Forum (NSCF) announces its nineteenth roundtable on the topic of 'Open Access, Open Archives and Open Source'. The forum will be held at the State Library of New South Wales on Tuesday 27 September 2005.

NSCF is a body sponsored by the four Australian learned academies, with membership from a wide range of bodies representing academics, independent researchers, writers, librarians, publishers, together with specialists in copyright and in the new digital technologies.

Keynote speakers at the September roundtable include Professor John Unsworth from the University of Illinois; Dr Neil Jacobs from University College, London, and Digital Repositories program manager with the UK Joint Information Services Committee; Professor Stevan Harnad from the University of Montreal and the University of Southampton; and Dr Michael Jubb, director of the UK Research Libraries Network.

Registration is soon to open at <http://www.humanities.org.au/> (follow the links to Events, NSCF, Current Symposium). For more information, phone the Australian Academy of the Humanities on 02 6125 9860 or e-mail Kate Fullagar, kate.fullagar@anu.edu.au.