

# Truly a profession: reflective and research-focused



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In October, ALIA was proud to host the third International Evidence Based Librarianship (EBL) Conference. The EBL forum, attended by more than 200 library and information professionals, was held in Brisbane. The first EBL Conference was held in Sheffield in 2001, and the second hosted by Edmonton, Alberta, in 2003. The third conference theme was 'Global Perspectives of Linking Research with Practice' and the forum was truly international, with delegates from the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Brazil, the Czech Republic and beyond.

Evidence-based practice has become a prevailing topic of discussion within the library and information literature. It can be strongly argued that research is critical for the creation of professional knowledge and therefore critical to the survival and growth of the library and information profession. Without a commitment to research, we will not be a profession as such, but merely an occupation that focuses on routine processes. ALIA's interest in bringing the conference to Australia carries an important message to Australian librarians that, indeed, we can truly regard ourselves as a profession.

The concept of evidence-based practice originated in evidence-based medicine, which is 'an approach to decision making in which the clinician uses the best evidence available in consultation with a patient to decide upon the option which suits the patient best' (Muir Gray 2001, p17). Health and medical librarians were the first to appreciate the value of our own professional practice being based on current, valid and reliable research activities. ALIA director Ann Ritchie (1999) has stated clearly that, in our role as managers of the research literature of other professions, we are uniquely placed to model the principles of evidence-based practice within our own professional activities.

The profession's understanding of research into practice is closely linked to the concept of reflective practice. The ability to critically analyse and make informed judgments is underpinned by the ability to reflect on our professional practice: 'a profession without reflective practitioners willing to learn about the advances in research in the field is a blinkered profession, one that is disconnected from best practice and best thinking, and one which, by default, often resorts to advocacy and position as a bid for survival' (Todd 2003, p4).

Reflective practice is a crucial tool to manage the constant change in our workplaces, from both the perspective of the social developments (which influence the expectations of users of the information services we provide) and the perspective of the technological changes that affect the development

and delivery of these services. As information professionals, it is absolutely essential that we draw on our research skills to critically review and evaluate our work practices to ensure that the services we develop are not only innovative and dynamic, but also relevant and appropriate for our users. Without effective evaluation strategies, we are unable to demonstrate the value or the impact of our services. In a policy environment which demands ever-increasing accountability, librarians need to draw on the evidence of their research to justify current funding or to seek additional funding to develop their services. To simply accept the status quo is to ensure extinction.

The 3rd EBL Conference provided evidence that the LIS profession is becoming increasingly reflective and research-focused. The papers presented extended beyond health information services, to cover a range of areas of practice: library management, user needs, information-seeking behaviour, information literacy and e-learning. The forum combined formal presentations with hot topics that showcased emerging research activities across the profession. Lively discussions and interchanges of ideas were encouraged through interactive workshops, round tables and debates. Preliminary evaluation of delegate feedback suggests that the conference was successful in providing meaningful and challenging content, stimulating new ideas and encouraging networking and peer exchange.

At the conference, ALIA director Roxanne Missingham led a discussion about the ALIA Research and Exchange Partnership (REAP). REAP has been established to enable the Association to become more proactive in the support and encouragement of Australian library and information (LIS) research, particularly research based in information practice. The discussion reinforced the delegates' belief that research is important for both employers and members and that a research culture is a key to developing LIS as a profession in Australia. However, individual practitioners clearly cannot succeed in developing this research culture without the support of LIS educators, employers and their professional association, ALIA.

LIS educators have the responsibility to ensure graduates are equipped not only with the conceptual structures and thinking processes of their discipline, but also with an understanding of and experience in the range of research methodologies that can be applied in practice. Employers need to provide an environment that encourages and rewards research activities, with access to the resources and career-long learning that is needed to implement evidence based practice within the work context. ALIA has a responsibility to work with employers to encourage, enable and reward the development of research skills and knowledge within

## Feedback to your Board of Directors

Do you have an idea, compliment or concern about your Association? Contact any director and ideas will be reviewed at each Board meeting.

E-mail to [feedback@alia.org.au](mailto:feedback@alia.org.au) will be automatically forwarded to all Board members.

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## Your voice

Dear Editor,

I've just finished reading Francis Wheen's book *How mumbo jumbo conquered the world* and now feel happy to trust my instincts and identify mumbo jumbo when I see it, or, in the case of John Stanley's article 'Step three: Journey of excitement', read it. I've been sceptical of his ideas for a long time, but now feel I must publicly dissent.

I enjoy walking into my local library and seeing books on the shelves. That's why I go there, that's why my aged mother goes there and when the need arises even my teenage kids go there for exactly the same reason.

The highlight of my library experience is finding books on the shelf that I want to read, for my mother it's finding something that she's read about in the newspaper or heard about on the radio, and the kids, well they usually just want something to help them write their essays with as little pain or effort as possible.

I don't enjoy the retail experience with their invasive marketing techniques but I put up with it when I have to do my shopping. I don't really have a choice. However I don't want to have to put up with it in my local library.

I enjoy the fact that I can hear conversations, children mucking

about, the staff talking to each other and the general murmur of human activity. That's what I want, and I want my love of books to be shared by the staff in my library because that's what a library is to me. That's what excites me about libraries. It saddens me immensely to walk into my library and see the shelves more than half empty just because that's how a retailer would display them. What happened to all those great books?

I've no objection to libraries branching out and providing services in different formats, using different technologies but I sincerely hope that public libraries soon recover from what appears to be a monumental identity crisis.

I like libraries much more than I like retail stores; let's not muddle them up.

**Lesley James, Mount Barker, SA**

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

*All letters should be addressed to the incite editor and may be e-mailed to [incite@alia.org.au](mailto:incite@alia.org.au), or faxed to 02 6282 2249, or posted to: Your voice, ALIA, PO Box 6335, Kingston 2604. Please include your name and postal address with your letter or e-mail.*

*Letters will be accepted for publication until the 18th of the month.*

- ▶ the profession, as well as to develop and articulate the profession's policies and future directions. Strategies can include professional development courses to develop research skills, encouraging support from more experienced researchers through mentoring, and easy access to information on the ALIA website about research opportunities and industry research awards such as the ALIA Study Grant Award, the Ray Choate Scholarship, the Dunn & Wilson Scholarship and the YBP/Lindsay & Howes Research Award for Collection Services.

While it is imperative that ALIA communicates the results of research activities through channels such as ALIA conferences, ALJ, AARL and the REAP e-print repository, more needs to be done to encourage the dissemination of projects that are currently unreported, and also for LIS professionals to reach out to an audience beyond our own profession to ensure that we don't just preach to the converted, but that the wider world hears our loud and clear messages about the achievements and the impact of our professional work.

### References

Muir Gray, J A (2001) *Evidence-based healthcare: how to make health policy and management decisions*, 2nd ed. Churchill Livingstone, London.

Todd, R (2003) 'Learning in the information age school: opportunities, outcomes and options', International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) 2003 Annual Conference, Durban, South Africa, 7–11 July 2003.

Ritchie, A (1999) 'Evidence-based decision making', *incite*, 20(12), p33. ■

## Election of ALIA vice-president and three directors

### Call for nominations

Nominations are called for ALIA vice-president [president-elect] and three positions on the Board of Directors of ALIA as incorporated under *Corporations Law*.

The vice-president [president-elect] and the two positions on the Board of Directors will be elected by the membership at large and one position will be elected by institutional members.

Nominees must be personal members of the Association and will represent the interests of the organisation as a whole rather than those of a particular constituency.

The vice-president and directors will assume office immediately following the 2006 Annual General Meeting (May).

The vice-president [president-elect] will assume the presidency following the Annual General Meeting of the Association in 2007 to the 2008 Annual General Meeting. The term of office of directors will be until the Annual General Meeting in 2008.

Nominations must be in writing and must be signed by two financial members of the Association and include the consent in writing of the nominee.

Nomination forms must be accompanied by a 100-word current *curriculum vitae* which provides full details of academic and professional qualifications and a 100-word statement of professional concerns. The *curriculum vitae* should be arranged under headings of present position, previous positions and professional activities. A standard colour portrait photograph *must* be included.

Nomination forms are available from ALIA National Office, or via ALIANet.

Nominations close at 5:00pm AEDT on **3 February 2006** and should be sent to the ALIA executive director, PO Box 6335, Kingston ACT 2604, e-mail [enquiry@alia.org.au](mailto:enquiry@alia.org.au), or fax 02 6282 2249.

Forms and information available from <http://alia.org.au/governance/elections/2006/>.