

Still more to do on pay equity



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Librarians have led the current quest for pay equity in Australia. Their 2002 Test Case triumph in New South Wales remains by far the most significant step yet taken in Australia to redress years of pay disadvantage for workers in feminised occupations.

When librarians won pay rises of more than 30 per cent, they startled even those pessimists who saw pay equity campaigns as mere pie in the sky [<http://alia.org.au/publishing/incite/2002/05/workwatch.html>]. Since then, ALIA has worked hard to champion the rates awarded in that judgment as the proper contemporary standard for library work in Australia. With our encouragement, many employers have adopted a nexus with them in non-award wage negotiations. Progress has clearly been made, but much remains to be done.

It is encouraging then to see other states following the New South Wales lead. Some time ago both Tasmania and Queensland included new equal remuneration principles — based on those adopted in NSW — in their own wage fixing principles. This column recently reported on action in Western Australia and ALIA's involvement in it. Last year the WA Gender Pay Gap Review made sweeping recommendations for action to address inequities. Many of our suggestions were incorporated. ALIA has also received encouraging responses from the state's Minister for Employment Protection, who commissioned the Review. Now, with re-election of the Gallop government, we will be making further submissions as proposals are put into practice. Our particular concern is the obvious and highly dubious concentration of professional librarians at lower classification levels. Details of ALIA's involvement in the Review can be found at <http://alia.org.au/employment/wa.gender.html>.

Victoria has become the latest state to show its determination to get to grips with pay disadvantage. The Industrial Relations Minister, Rob Hulls, recently released the report of the Pay Equity Inquiry set up in March 2004. Chaired by Commissioner Whelan of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, the Inquiry found a Victorian gender pay gap of 18.4 per cent in full-time adult wages. There has been no significant improvement in women's pay as a percentage of men's since 1986. A relative decline in part-time earnings is a particular concern, given the huge increase in that form of work and the high proportion of women working in it, including librarians. Like other studies of these issues, the Inquiry confirmed that women's segregation in feminised occupations leads to systemic undervaluation

of their skills. Failure to properly assess the value of librarians' skills was at the very heart of the NSW Industrial Relations Commission decision to award large increases in the Librarians Test Case.

To address these problems, the Inquiry has made twenty sweeping recommendations for action. Central to them is development of a formal Plan of Action for Pay Equity, underpinned by a pay equity unit and a pay equity fund. A series of case studies would be conducted and would be required to take close note of the approach in New South Wales, especially as regards selection of occupational groups for study. Given our success there, this approach looks promising for Victorian librarians. Another recommendation mirrors the proposal in Western Australia for mandatory pay equity audits of the public service and its agencies as a 'showcase' for the government's commitment to equity. This too is encouraging for librarians in the state, given that such a high proportion are employed in the government sector. It is also proposed to develop a model for private sector audits. While these would initially be conducted on a voluntary basis, the Inquiry recommends review after twelve months to examine whether they should be made compulsory. It is suggested that government consider incentives for employers who can demonstrate progress on pay equity audits and remedial action. One option is preferred tenderer status for co-operative organisations. Other important recommendations call for a major gender equity education campaign, various media programs, a high-profile tripartite symposium and comprehensive training systems.

Overall, the Victorian Inquiry report maintains momentum towards pay improvements for disadvantaged employees. It offers further potential for librarians. Sceptics will still reserve judgment on just how much can be achieved. And scepticism is a useful commodity. It keeps the feet in contact with the ground, always a necessary pre-condition for progress. But it should not spill over into cynicism and defeatism. Those librarians who played key roles in the NSW Test Case would never have achieved what they did if they had listened to the cynics who scoffed in the early stages of that campaign.

We have some way to go before all Australian librarians reach the salary standards set in New South Wales. Average Australian full-time salaries for librarians — as measured by the Australian Bureau of Statistics — now stand at 126 per cent of those of the workforce as a whole. That is markedly better than the situation ten years ago. But it needs to be better still. ■

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