# Defining our professional skill set

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On 24 May 2006 the ALIA Sydney group held a public discussion of the issues facing the profession, led by a group of panelists. Speakers included Maxine Brodie, Francis Sims, Kay Harris and myself. The facilitators were two new professionals, Adrienne Harris and Alyson Dalby. The speakers looked at the issues from their special environments, Maxine from the university library perspective, Francis from public libraries, Kay from specials and I commented on more general matters. Some themes came strongly to the fore: first, the importance of understanding, defining and communicating the new skill set required by today's professionals; second, the impact of technology and the enormous change this has brought to how we carry out our work; and, finally, the importance of understanding the needs of the organisation we work in and positioning our services strategically so that they are seen to add value to the organisation.

There was a lively discussion relating to the concept of defining a required skill set for a position rather than relying on the traditional classification system of librarian or library technician in defining these requirements. Many of you will already be working in organisations where this has been the case for many years, for example in the Commonwealth public sector, universities and in the private sector. These organisations do not necessarily require ALIA accreditation, they are looking for a specific set of skills.

In her talk Maxine described how Macquarie University has undertaken a complete review of the positions in the library and has redefined all positions by the skills required and not by the terms librarian etc. She also indicated the significant changes in the workforce in university libraries as they move to purchasing an ever-increasing range of online resources, specifically serials. Many roles in the acquisitions area such as serial check in will simply disappear in a few years. The discussion ranged around the position descriptions now used in advertisements and it was suggested that fewer positions will be described in the traditional way in future. While this may pose some short-term challenges for those looking for work, it demonstrates very clearly the enormous potential for those trained in the skill sets gained through library and information science/management programs.

As you can see, I am having some difficulty defining the names of the education programs themselves, as these have also been in a state of flux over the past ten years as the universities seek to realign the disciplines to provide more relevant and employer-targeted programs. At the heart of this discussion was another concept, emphasised by Kay Harris, that the skill set does not need to be linked to an organisation or particular physical place such as a library.

While many of us will wish to continue to use our skill set working in a library, our discussions and debates need to be much more inclusive so that our skills, not just our place of work, can be a defining factor in demonstrating our value. ALIA and its forerunner, the Library Association of Australia, believed that it had a role to promote the development of libraries and the services they provide. (For those of you interested in the early history of our professional association I refer you to the McColvin Report 1947, which I looked at again since becoming president.)

The promotion of our role, services and profession is an ongoing issue for us all to think about as both public and private sector organisations continue to come under pressure to streamline their services and cut costs. These are not unusual circumstances, they are recurring and we as professionals need to take the initiative individually, as well as collectively in ALIA, to show leadership in what is possible in the provision of dynamic and relevant library and information services.

All speakers raised the far-reaching impact of technology on our work, in particular on the services we provide. The exciting developments in this field, including the convergence of technologies, have many of us redefining our services and products and demonstrating how we add value to our organisation. Reflect for a moment on your own environment and your vision for service. Can you stretch this vision five years into the future?

The technology allows us to move into providing new and relevant services in ways unimagined ten years ago as well as making certain roles redundant. Take a moment to reflect on the professional literature and library science curricula of 40 years ago. It is clear that systems and processes defined our profession at that time, systems of cataloguing and classification in particular. These areas also consumed the most resources in an organisation. With the arrival of the internet and its widespread accessibility, our processing skills seemed to lose value, as fast, unstructured searching produced amazing results for users. Today we all use the internet as the first step in finding information and libraries are moving rapidly to co-operate with the major players such as Google and Yahoo.

This new world offers professionals with our skill set new opportunities to demonstrate our value in providing leading-edge services and products. Of course it also challenges our old value set. It is our opportunity to initiate new services and to provide the client with their results in context. It is time to use our creativity. I encourage you to stretch your thinking in service provision and to identify what will make a real difference to your clients.

Taking this step as an initiator means that you will engage with the priorities of the organisation you serve and ensure that your service is relevant and valued. This issue was highlighted by Francis Sims when she discussed the services provided by the very busy Willoughby Public Library and the challenge of maintaining a service while designing, demolishing and building a new library on the existing site. ▶

# Your voice

## Narrow-minded attitudes

There I was thinking our profession had got over such narrow-minded attitudes as that displayed in the letter 'Xboxes in libraries' (*in-Cite*, April 2006). Yes Mr Williams, we do have Xboxes in our library, which serves one of the most multicultural communities in South Australia. This includes many new young arrivals with some fundamental language and literacy problems to whom reading and books mean not a lot.

Far from being 'foolish and ultimately self-defeating', we have found that our Xboxes have helped us forge a link with these, and other youth, to help make the library a place they feel comfortable visiting because there is something for them, something they can understand, use and enjoy. Ultimately this has paid off, as we can build on that link through introducing programs such as Homework Help, where we work with these young people on using the broader library resources and services. My staff report that as the relationship has developed, these youngsters feel able to ask for help with things such as putting together a CV and yes, even asking about a good book.

Another interesting spin-off is that we find other family members wandering in because their children have gone home and told them all about having fun at the library. These people are curious because this is a long way from their childhood memories of a library and often, they also want somewhere to relax and get away from a busy life. This must be one of the core functions of a modern public library, to provide a safe, free and comfortable environment and as people come to enjoy that, they soon discover our resources and so the cycle continues.

Far from 'undo[ing] all the good work', let's get away from the 50s attitude and get on with making our public libraries a place for all community members to live, learn and enjoy, and I certainly have no compunction in using a bit of 'commercial culture' to do just that.

*Shane Cathcart, Hilton SA*

## A tale of three cities

In the June 2006 issue of *inCite* Bathurst City Library's John Cumberford ('Library v Learning Centre') responded to an earlier article 'Lithgow, first learning city in NSW'. As the manager of Central West Libraries centred on Orange, the third of the three regional cities that are strung out along the highway between the Blue Mountains in the east and Dubbo to the west, I feel a strong need to contribute to this discussion.

While there are many similarities between these three cities, there is enough divergence to ensure that each library service responds differently to meet the needs of their community.

The Lithgow Library Learning Centre (its official name) is to be congratulated on the way in which they have championed their Council's decision to become a learning city, an innovative move designed to reinvigorate a struggling community and equip people with the skills needed to survive and thrive in the 21st century. This action has firmly positioned the Library as a key contributor to community life and attracted much needed funding for the construction of the new Library building which incorporates the Technology Centre.

In Orange, as we have just completed extensive consultations as part of the development of our Marketing Plan, I feel confident in talking about what our community wants. Our clients have indicated that they value the library as a centre for research and life-long learning, for social connections and yes, for recreational reading. Overwhelmingly they added the words 'value added' to describe how they would like the reading experience to be improved. Building on the work that is happening in Australia and overseas we will use the professional skills and expertise of our staff, coupled with their unbounded enthusiasm, to meet client expectations. At the same time we will continue to develop our strengths in other areas and provide a guarantee that their library won't be 'dumbed down'.

Bathurst is known for its educational facilities so perhaps the citizens seek information differently. Only they would know.

*Jan Richards, Manager, Central West Libraries, Orange NSW*

In response to John Cumberford's article (*inCite*, June 2006) regarding the Lithgow Library Learning Centre, the reader needs to know that the Centre meets the needs of the Lithgow community. Community consultation took place over a number of years. Three major areas of need were identified within the Lithgow community: the need for an improved library facility, a technology centre and a learning community. Council saw a golden opportunity to respond to these three needs by consolidating the library, the technology centre and the learning shop in to one multipurpose facility in the central business district.

The centre promotes reading, literacy and lifelong learning in a safe, comfortable setting. On a particular day the activity includes: resource loans; reference queries satisfied to a technical/professional level; internet use in the Tech Centre (62 per cent male on any day!); computer classes for seniors; Homework Centre with a qualified tutor; Storytime and craft activities; reading for leisure in the courtyard; Youth Council, Garden Club, Department of Health meetings; 20 Koreans learning English; video-conferencing with the Department of Industrial Relations, jobseekers and those in casual work; school students researching a local history project; family historians tracing ancestors; and groups of people socialising together in different areas of the library.

The Lithgow Library Learning Centre is providing the service the customers need for both information and recreational purposes. The number of people coming through the door in the new location has increased by 300 per cent. It is proving to be a delightful, friendly, well-used community space that the whole community enjoys.

*Penny Hall, Community manager, Lithgow City Council*

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My final issue for the evening was to encourage senior members of the profession to support the New Generation Group. They need our support to network and make connections but we also need to encourage them in learning and excellence. We need our new professionals to undertake further study, in particular formal study for higher degrees. We know that our environment will continue to change and we also know that the workplace is chang-ing rapidly. We need professionals who will review the existing body of knowledge that supports the educational curriculum for professional programs so that it can be reshaped and developed to meet the needs of the evolving workplace. ALIA, together with the Aurora Foundation, is continuing to promote and encourage the development of leaders for the profession and I encourage you to support these initiatives. ∎