Contract negotiations, WorkChoices and advocacy

These subjects have been the main items on my agenda in recent weeks. Now that my first few months with ALIA have passed, members and library users generally are contacting me more regularly, with queries as to pay and leave entitlements, especially in the context of contract negotiation. Inquiries from institutions have principally related to skills shortages, which, especially in regional areas, seem as common in the library sector as in other sections of the workforce.

Most of the queries received from individual members concerning employment contracts relate, predictably, to salary levels. The first reference point for anyone in the library sector should be the guidelines set out at http://alia.org.au/employment/salary.scales. The salary levels and role descriptions cover issues such as length of service and experience, together with level of supervisory responsibility or, alternatively, ability to work with minimal supervision, as often happens in one-person libraries or where branches are located on different sites. For staff in public libraries, salary levels are generally less elastic than in the private sector, but in any area where scope for negotiation exists the following points are relevant.

It is standard throughout the wider workforce that the level of financial responsibility an appointee has affects their pay level, just as supervisory responsibilities or the requirement to work with minimal supervision does. For example, a librarian in the private sector contacted ALIA recently about annual salary negotiations, advising that *inter alia* she has responsibility for an annual library and related IT budget of more than $1m. That level of financial responsibility would be a strong argument for a salary above that normally recommended for such a position. A further factor to consider in setting wages would be level of specialisation, for example in a research library or in a library attached to one of the professions. Especially in a time of skills shortages, likely difficulties in replacing a librarian with specialised experience and corporate memory can validly be raised when work value is being assessed.

WorkChoices

ALIA members will be aware from press reports that the *WorkChoices* legislation has been in force for one year as at 27 March 2007. This legislation entailed major revision to the 1996 *Workplace Relations Act*. In the February edition of *inCite* I referred to some of the early case law arising from *WorkChoices*, specifically in situations of organisational restructure and consequent redundancies.

In brief, the provisions of *WorkChoices* cover all employees in the Territories (due to the 'Territories power' of s122 of the Commonwealth Constitution) and in Victoria, as that state referred its industrial relations powers to the Commonwealth during the 1990s.

Some cases currently under consideration could affect the coverage of library staff employed by local councils. One such case is that initiated by the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) before the Federal Court to determine if a local council is a trading corporation, as defined in the Constitution. If so, then council employees, including council and shire librarians, would be governed by *WorkChoices* and could lose entitlements that may currently exist under state awards. Future 'Workwatch' columns will keep ALIA members up to date on these developments.

Advocacy

The National Office has made several representations in recent weeks concerning reductions in library services available to ACT residents. One branch of the ACT Library Service was closed in December, after only a few weeks' notice to the Canberra community and with no public consultation. The report on Canberra library services, on which the branch closure was based, foreshadows other possible cuts to reference services and reduction in the number of senior library posts. These measures would not only have serious career implications for library staff but also diminish the level of services available to library users. A letter from Sue Hutley as the Executive Director was published in the *Canberra Times* on 11 March and has elicited favourable responses to ALIA from the general community. A further letter has been sent to the relevant ACT Minister. ALIA continues to monitor the ACT situation and to do so in consultation with local library staff, of whom more than 300 are ALIA members.

ALIA wishes to be informed of any developments such as those occurring in the ACT. While queries as to salary levels and other employment conditions are most commonly received from individuals, ALIA's 800 institutional members can also approach the National Office when policies are implemented at corporate level which affect library staff and users.

Another forum in which ALIA has recently been active is the committee established in 2006 by the Local Government Managers' Association (LGMA) to address skills shortages. The committee has prepared a strategy paper, with the next step being an approach to the Commonwealth for financial and other assistance to attract professionals to the local government sector. Each of these advocacy roles has drawn ALIA's work to the attention of the wider community, which relies at various levels on the services of library professionals.

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