

BUILDING OUR PROFESSION

Show me the money – financial responsibilities and a strong profession

At LIANZA 2009, Claudia Lux, then President of IFLA, mentioned in her keynote address that describing what a librarian does is one of the hardest things she's had to do. If you extend that difficulty from the individual to the association it demonstrates the challenges we have in ensuring a strong profession and a strong professional association. We are a sectorally and geographically diverse and dispersed profession.

Watkins provides a sociological observation as to why professional associations exist.

The taxonomic approach categorises the professions as a special group of occupations possessing unique attributes that distinguish them from other non-professional occupations (Goode, 1960; Johnson, 1972; Crompton, 1987). Characteristics seen as distinctive include possession of specialised skills, the necessity of intellectual and practical training, and the perceived collective responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the profession as a whole through a professional body or association. Professional associations have common characteristics in that their members have higher-level educational qualifications, pay annual subscriptions, have passed a professional examination, etc. They have common interests in areas such as educational standards, codes of conduct, governance, and day-to-day management. In representing 'professionals' they see themselves as distinct from the associations representing 'other' occupational groups.

Maintaining and building a strong profession and maintaining and building a strong professional association go hand in glove. Advocacy, course/program and qualification accreditation, offering professional development, supporting members with professionally related information needs are all important roles for ALIA.

One important role that is often overlooked by members is the ongoing financial sustainability of the Association. Without a financially sustainable ALIA the key roles I've highlighted would be jeopardised, eliminated, or undertaken by other groups.

To continue to grow and build the profession and ALIA, we need funds. To obtain these funds we need members. To attract and retain members we need services. And so it spirals. We need to ensure that we – the profession and association – are travelling up the spiral rather than down.

As an enterprise ALIA is a small-to-medium sized business with net assets of approximately \$5M and an annual turnover between \$2M and \$3M. ALIA is a registered company and we are obliged to meet the legislative and regulatory requirements of the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC).

To oversee these obligations and provide advice to the ALIA Board on financial matters ALIA has the Finance, Audit and Risk Management (FARM) Standing Committee. The membership of FARM is normally the Vice-President (Chair), President, one other Board member, the Executive Director, chief Financial Officer, and most importantly an independent and external expert. We are fortunate to have John Fletcher as our independent expert. John is a retired partner of an accounting firm, and has past and current experience on a number of boards. John provides invaluable advice and observations from the perspective of a finance professional.

While ALIA is in sound financial shape we nevertheless need to be careful and diligent in how we manage and apply our revenue streams, expenses, cash flow, investments, and assets. The underlying premise in all our deliberations and decisions is ensuring members benefit.

One salient piece of news that library world received during the week was that the Canadian Library Association (CLA) announcement that it was restructuring its activities as its current operating model was no longer sustainable. They are realigning its structure, services and priorities with members' needs and national interest. To ensure ALIA doesn't follow suit we need to ensure ongoing financial sustainability.

It is an exciting time to be involved with ALIA. The Board eagerly awaits the release of the report of 'Re-conceptualising and re-positioning Australian library and information science education for the twenty-first century' (see Sue's **Directline**, pg 5), a research project lead by Associate Professor Helen Partridge from QUT who is also a current Board member. The outcomes of the report could mean a reframing of LIS professionals in the future.

Almost by definition it means that we have an opportunity to reframe what our Association is, what it does, and the form it takes. Underpinning all this will be the need for strong financial sustainability.

Playing a role in building a strong LIS profession and ALIA as the peak LIS professional association is exciting, rewarding, and challenging. Being a Board member and being on FARM might just be the challenge you're looking for. A strong profession, a strong professional association, a strong and financially sustainable ALIA!

Reference: Watkins, J. 'Educating professionals: the changing role of UK professional associations'. *Journal of Education and Work* 12, no.1 (1999): 37–56.

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