

HOW WILL THE LIBRARY PROFESSION RESPOND TO THE ASIAN CENTURY?

Asia's extraordinary ascent

The Government White Paper, *Australia in the Asian Century*¹, released in October 2012, is intended as a "roadmap" for the nation to "navigate the Asian century".

The progress in all Asian countries over recent decades in most aspects of society has been profound, whether in health, education, technology, wealth and size of the middle class, or material infrastructure. This staggering advancement and the way it will continue is fully described in the first two chapters of the *White Paper*. Countries vary in the ways they have advanced, but overall the people of Asia have a higher standard of living, are better educated, and live under more stable political systems. Not only has the centre of global economic activity shifted from the West to Asia, but Asia has also become a hub of innovation. Even Asian pop culture is growing in popularity around the world.

All these advances present both challenges and opportunities for Australia. While historically Australia has been among the most remote countries in the world, it is increasingly enjoying the advantage of having a close proximity to the centre of world activity. Being in similar time zones to the most dynamic Asian countries will also be an advantage. But there may also be negative impacts; Asia's lower wages in the IT and manufacturing industries may have a detrimental impact on sections of our society.

Opportunities for Australian libraries

Are librarians, libraries, and ALIA adapting to meet this dramatic shift in orientation towards Asia?

One area of possible opportunity for the profession lies in the increased demand for information about Asia. There are many references in the *White Paper* to the need for Australians to be better informed, more knowledgeable, and have a better understanding of Asia: "For businesses to capture opportunities in the rapidly growing Asian market, Australia needs to have a highly skilled and educated workforce that **understands** (my emphasis) the region's diversity and builds enduring relationships with its people". Library and information professionals can help Australians

understand by providing access to relevant information.

Even for those Australians who will not themselves be engaged with Asian countries, there may be a need to be better informed about the societies to our near North. For example, inbound tourists from Asia will comprise 45% of all tourists by 2021 (up from 41% currently) requiring, one would assume, some knowledge of and sensitivity to the culture, languages, and values of the people of Asian countries. Here it would seem is an opportunity for public and children's libraries to assist future Australians to be more understanding of

can adapt the lessons of the best school systems in our region to drive improvements. In the same way, libraries too could learn from their most dynamic counterparts, such as those in Singapore.

A role for ALIA

The *White Paper* insists that improving our links with Asian countries will require the effort of a broad spectrum of society, not just the Government, and this broad spectrum will include individuals, businesses, unions, and other institutions and community groups. Here ALIA could play a role in this re-focusing of attitude. (A prescient intention to do this in 2013 was commendably

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and comfortable with Asian cultures and values over the long term.

Another opportunity in this new environment lies in the highly-developed professional skills that exist among the library and information profession in this country. Opportunities should be developed to allow Australian library and information professionals to undertake work, volunteer, and exchange opportunities in kindred institutions in Asian countries. At the same time, these opportunities will be an enriching experience for the participants themselves, enabling them to develop language skills and a deeper cultural awareness. This experience in turn will embellish an LIS professional's *curriculum vitae* on their return to Australia, provided employers are prepared to recognise and give credit for these skills, reflected in practical ways such as promotion and appointment decisions.

The *White Paper* believes that in the field of education, Australian schools

stated by the President and Executive Director in their Frontline column in the December 2012 issue of INCITE when they gave a commitment to review ALIA's international presence, including engaging with "our near neighbours").

Previous professional collaboration in library and information science is briefly mentioned in the *White Paper*², but no specific examples are provided. One action ALIA might undertake would be the resurrection of ALIA's International Relations Committee, providing the Committee establishes and carries through a program of engaging with other library associations in Asia. Asialink, as described in the *White Paper*³, may be an organisation which could assist ALIA to strengthen its links to similar associations in the region.

¹ *Australia in the Asian Century; White Paper*, October 2012. (Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). ISBN 978-1-921739-92-7 and <http://asiancentury.dpmc.gov.au/whitepaper>.

² p. 267.
³ p. 180.

ALIA conferences could be more widely promoted in our neighbouring countries to increase the number of attendees from Asia. Conversely, Asian library conferences such as CONSAL (Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians) could be more actively advertised in Australia. Australia has long had a representative on IFLA's Regional Standing Committee for Asia and Oceania, that position currently being held by Jayshree Mamtara. Perhaps ALIA, through its Asia Pacific Special Interest Group, could help in promoting the Regional Standing Committee's deliberations and activities more widely? ALIA could also play a part in encouraging library schools to include Asia-relevant subjects on their syllabi and build in-country partnerships. It could encourage employers to give credit for Asia-relevant skills.

Professional development

Administrators at ALIA and in Australian library and information settings will need to consider the *White Paper* statement, "Organisations that are successful in the Asian century will need staff who have specific knowledge of the products and markets of Asia, along with the cultural and language capabilities needed to be active in the region". The government has committed to assisting institutions to deepen their people-to-people links. ALIA and the profession as a whole should take advantage of the proposed 12 000 Australia Awards (Asian Century) to be offered over five years, which will provide opportunities for Australians to study, undertake work placements and mid-term sabbaticals in the region, or conversely, for people from the region to undertake work placements or professional development in Australia⁴.

Past and present achievements

It would be incorrect to leave the impression that the library profession and ALIA have not in the past undertaken and are not currently involved in any Asian-oriented activities. There are many examples of programs which have sought to fulfil the objectives outlined in the *White Paper*. For example, more Asian material for schools is being added to the National Digital Learning Resources Network⁵. The National Library of Australia under Dr. George Chandler established the annual meeting of the Directors of National Libraries of Asia and the Pacific. On the subject of staff exchanges, the Australian National University Library conducted professional exchanges with the National Library of China and the National Library of Australia organised secondments from the National Diet Library of Japan. For a number of years IDP (International Development Program of Australian Universities and Colleges) conducted library assistance projects in Southeast Asia, while many Southeast Asian librarians were trained in Australia under the auspices of the BISA program of the University of New South Wales. Currently, Libraries for Timor-Leste Inc. is actively involved in the development of libraries in East Timor. And ALIA itself, through its Asia Pacific Special Interest Group, has been conducting activities and publishing a newsletter since 1988, reporting on libraries in the region as well as on Asian collections within Australia. It is an apposite time to build on these endeavours.

Public commentary on the *White Paper*

The *White Paper* is not essentially about Australia's relationship with Asia. It is about how Australia can thrive and prosper in a century that will be dominated by Asia. The *Paper* has a heavy economic bias, talking about consumption, productivity, trade, and manufacturing and the conventional "growth economics" approach has also meant that climate change and environmental issues receive relatively minor consideration. It has to be said that there is little advocacy of

understanding the culture of Asian countries for their intrinsic value; heavy emphasis is placed on engaging with Asia for the material benefit of Australians and the prosperity of our nation.

Nevertheless, there is a great deal of information and many worthwhile objectives provided in this substantial work.

Conclusion

While there is much in the *White Paper* of general application for our profession, the disappointing aspect for library and information professionals is that there are no practical recommendations regarding libraries and information centres and how they may play an increasing role in helping Australians to become better informed about Asia, despite the fact that ALIA suggested several specific, low-cost proposals in its submission to the *White Paper* Task Force⁶. While much of the paper talks about the need for better Asian literacy, improved language skills, and a deeper knowledge of Asia, libraries and information systems have not been earmarked as one of the most practical ways to achieve these goals. In the *White Paper*, football, cricket, digital ninjas, and even *Junior Masterchef Australia* are tools to help Australian navigate the Asian Century. But libraries, as a way of improving understanding, are not. Librarians themselves, by their actions, will need to redress this omission.

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⁶ ALIA. Submission to the Australia in the Asian Century Taskforce. (Canberra, 2012). Available at: http://www.alia.org.au/groups/apsig/newsletter/APSIGNewsletter_March.2012_No78.pdf.

⁴ pp. 257, 265.

⁵ Harvey, Michelle, "National collection of Asian languages and studies resources", *Asian Currents*, December 2012, 25. <www.asaa.asn.au/publications/ac/2012/asian-currents-12-12.pdf>