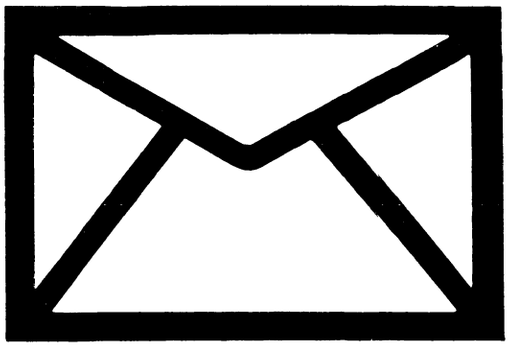

LAA membership

In *InCite* for 16 November, John Levett pointed out that membership of the LAA (or even eligibility for membership) is not a reliable indicator of professional competence. In the same issue, Edward Reid-Smith suggested that professional associations may be obsolete. If the decline in membership of the LAA is a real problem over which we have any control, then these two statements contain the germ of a solution.

In the English-speaking world, professional associations have sought to influence their fields of activity by controlling recruitment and vocational education and also by acting as a source of reference (nowadays a pressure group) for their speciality, within society at large. Messrs. Levett's and Reid-Smith's comments indicate to me that recruitment and education are the areas on which we should focus our attention.

Should not the letters 'ALAA' after one's name indicate the possession of some additional or different knowledge than the letters which signify one's academic qualifications? Do we really expect (and expect other people to believe) that just belonging to a professional association and attending the odd meeting or course means that skills are being usefully maintained and expanded? John Levett has pointed out the fallacy of this and Edward Reid-Smith's comment indicates that the reason may be that professional bodies cannot function in the same way now as they have in the past. Is it not time for the LAA to try a new approach in this area?

How could the letters 'ALAA' be made to indicate possession of something unique to which professionals would subscribe and for which employers would seek? Here is one suggestion of which many of us are already aware.

A degree or graduate diploma in librarianship (and perhaps also certain types of computer studies or information science studies) would allow a person to join the LAA as a 'licentiate', (to borrow the British term). After a period of time, such a person would be allowed to submit evidence of practical experience or skill, built on but distinct from that gained in their academic qualification. This would allow them to be elevated to the status of associate: the LAA's basic professional qualification, guaranteeing that the holder had a fundamental level of competence which would remain unaffected by how long ago they had qualified or were last in active practice.

Further to this, the FLAA would then be granted to those persons who wanted to advertise themselves as being committed to maintaining and expanding their knowledge and skills. Its initial award would depend on the associate taking a further degree (again in librarianship, computing or information science) and its continued possession (showing ongoing maintenance and expansion on this level) would depend on subsequent continuing education courses being taken per unit of time. An honorary fellowship would be retained for those whom the association wished to honour, saying in effect that their knowledge was such that their contribution to information work would not decay with time.

Apart from this, I think that any consideration of a decline in the Association's membership behoves us to ask certain fundamental questions and at least bear them in mind even if they cannot be answered immediately. The Library Association also has a declining membership. Is this an Australian problem, specific to the LAA and its area of competence or a world-wide one, with its roots outside information work and the readership of *InCite* in particular? Supposing the problem is restricted to information work, how many information workers are needed in Australia and how many of these should be members of the LAA?

Can one professional body be of use to all those who are involved in information work? Is it schismatic or realistic to ask whether persons who help the general public, the academic community and industry have enough in common? Objectivity is at a premium here and the final aim should be the optimisation of the contribution of information work to the wellbeing of Australia.

Is the decline in membership of the LAA part of a larger problem associated with professional bodies in the English-speaking world or is it because models drawn from that culture are ceasing to be relevant to multicultural Australia? France is much more populous than Australia. It is neither a cultural desert nor is it technically backward yet both its major professional bodies are much smaller than the LAA. I wonder if we take our position in society too much for granted sometimes.

John Bailey

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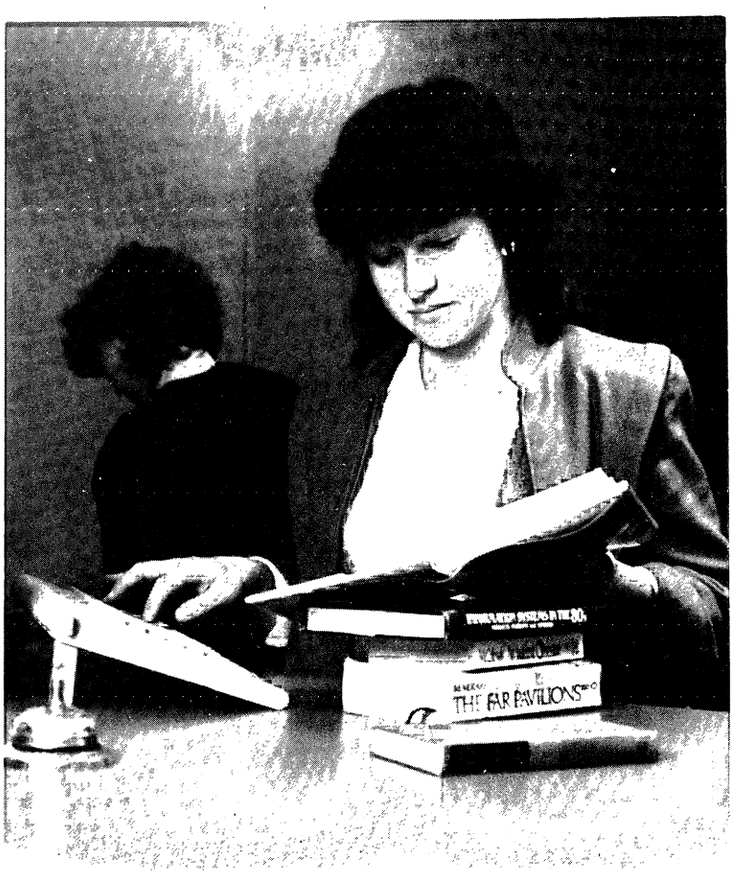

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