Australian library workers: who are they?

The workplace survey of Australian library workers was conducted for ALIA by the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT), one of Australia's leading research organisations on labour market issues. Of 1600 questionnaires distributed to a statistically stratified sample of library workers in all states and territories and in all industry sectors, an outstanding real response rate of seventy-five per cent was achieved

Library workers are older, better educated and more stable in their employment patterns than other Australian workers. Contrary to popular sentiment, their employment has not been hugely casualised. But the suspicion of poor rewards and low pay is accurate.

These are just some of the findings to emerge from ALIA's major national survey of Australalin library workers, conducted in late 1997. The project report contains a mass of interesting data. This is probably the largest survey of its kind ever undertaken in Australia, providing the clearest profile of library workers yet constructed. Among its major findings are: a remarkable age profile for Australian library workers, interesting pay issues, a high use of enterprise bargaining, a highly unionised workforce, low levels of casualisation, and professional insecurity.

Age profile
The age profile of library workers and ALIA members is remarkable, by comparison with the general workforce: seventy-two per cent of library workers are aged forty or older, compared to forty per cent of all Australian workers. More effective succession planning via employment of younger people should clearly be a vital policy issue for the sector.

Pay issues
In the past year, sixty-six per cent of library workers received a pay increase. After analysis, the intuitively-felt pay disadvantage of library workers relative to the total workforce is confirmed. Library workers whose pay increased, other than via promotion or change of job, received an average wage increase of 3.4 per cent — significantly lower than increases in Australian average weekly ordinary time earnings of 4.5 per cent and increases from enterprise agreements (4.4 per cent). This is notwithstanding the finding that library workers are better educated, more experienced and more stable in their employment patterns, relative to the total workforce. Given that a very high proportion of library workers is found in the public sector, real wage differentials for library workers can be seen as even greater when comparisons are

made with average wage increases for public sector workers as a whole (6.1 per cent). The relatively small proportion of private sector library workers fared much better than their public sector counterparts with average increases of 4.9 per cent. Some gender differences were evident: for example, among full-time librarians 50.4 per cent of men earn more than $800 per week, compared to 41.6 per cent of women. Pay data from the survey is already being used in the New South Wales Pay Equity Inquiry.

Enterprise bargaining
Adoption of enterprise bargaining is relatively high in library work. Sixty-three per cent of workers in the sector are covered by some form of negotiated agreement. But awards remain important with one third relying entirely on an award to regulate conditions of employment. A further forty per cent are subject to an enterprise agreement which operates in conjunction with, rather than instead of, a registered industrial award. Individual arrangements are becoming significant, however, with twelve per cent of librarians covered by either common law or registered individual employment contracts. Very few (1 per cent) library technicians are subject to individual contracts.

Unionisation
Library workers are highly unionised. Fifty-seven per cent of library workers are members of trade unions compared to thirty-one per cent in the total workforce. This does not confirm the oft-expressed view that librarians' employment benefits are inferior to those of some other workers because many librarians are not union members. A more likely explanation is poor representation by unions of library worker members, coupled with, and arguably to some extent resulting from, insufficient involvement in union affairs by library workers.

Casualisation of the profession
Library work is less casualised than work generally. A higher proportion of library workers (17.2 per cent) occupy permanent part-time positions, compared to the general workforce (7.3 per

cent) or the public sector (11.6 per cent). The proportion of casual library workers (5.6 per cent) is surprisingly low. A large majority of library workers is generally satisfied with working hours, with twenty-six per cent preferring to work less and seven per cent wanting longer hours. In respect of flexibility in standard working time, it is clear that enterprise bargaining has increased the numbers of library workers who can be rostered to work beyond the traditional Monday–Friday work week. Of workers covered by enterprise agreements, a much higher proportion are subject to seven-day rosters when compared to those subject to award coverage only. While twenty per cent of librarians are working more than eight hours overtime per week, full-time library workers as a whole work an average three hours less per week than the average for all Australian full-time workers. Overall, these data do not indicate a wholesale dismantling of jobs in the library and information sector which is sometimes suggested. They do suggest that, while the labour market's so-called core-periphery divide is of concern to some, its current effects on the sector generally may be slightly exaggerated. This impression is supported by the survey finding that ninety-four per cent of library workers are employed by only one employer.

Attitudes to change
Library workers are more positive than others in describing changes in the work environment. For example, thirty-six per cent of librarians and forty-three per cent of library technicians reported an increase in job satisfaction over the preceding twelve months, compared to thirty per cent in the total workforce. Library workers are particularly positive about autonomy and their ability to use their own ideas in their work with forty-one per cent of librarians and more than fifty-seven per cent of library technicians reporting this had increased in the past year. Only ten per cent and three per cent, respectively, reported a reduction. But increasing dissatisfaction with management was evident, with almost fifty per cent of librarians and fifty-three per cent of technicians reporting a decline in satisfaction levels in the ▶

past year. Allied to this, forty-four per cent of librarians felt they now have less say in organisational decisions affecting their jobs. And more than sixty per cent of respondents are experiencing greater stress levels at work. The policy indication from this is that library workers are fundamentally positive about their work, but want and would respond well to greater effort by management to consult and involve them.

Professional security

Finally, there is significant insecurity about the future among library workers. It is focussed heavily on workplace and industrial relations issues, with more than fifty per cent expressing major concern in this area. A third of respondents were worried about new technologies, some fearing that the very profession of librarianship was threatened by a prevailing view that 'any-

body' can now use new information systems. Others doubted their capacity to keep abreast of rapid technological change. New technology skills is the dominant training need identified by respondents. From a policy perspective, it is true that many of the changes giving rise to these concerns are probably inevitable facts of life. But their ubiquity suggests organisations and senior managers in the sector will be well-advised to address, and where possible minimise, employee fears if organisational performance targets are to be met.

ALIA members wanting more information about the results of the workplace survey should contact Phil Teece, manager, personnel and industrial relations, at ALIA National Office, telephone 02 6285 1877, e-mail phil.teece@alia.org.au ∎

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