Where the graduates are...

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Mairead Browne's 'Frontline' (*inCite* April 2000), 'Where are the Graduates?' raised a very important question in terms of the survival of ALIA. As a recent graduate and non-member myself, I found it interesting that there were others like me who had not joined our professional association. I then undertook a very informal survey of recent library graduates, revealing a number of common issues. Most related to a perceived lack of library jobs and limited awareness of ALIA's services. There was also little importance given to Association membership as a prerequisite for active professional involvement.

The survey was conducted using only a very small sample, so its results should in no way be considered scientific. Its purpose was to collect quick feedback from the group in question (graduates) to see if there were common concerns which might be used as a guide for future research by ALIA. From a total sample of twelve, all of whom responded, half are currently working in libraries and half now work in other information sectors. Five are aged in their late 20s, four are in their 30s and three are 40+. Eight respondents graduated between 1995 and 1999 and four graduated between 1990 and 1994. Only one is a member of ALIA. Two are members of other professional associations whilst nine are members of their union and two hold no memberships at all. Some respondents held more than one membership. Table 1 summarises the results.

Table 1

	Number	Percentage
Total number surveyed	12	100
Working in libraries	6	50
Other info. sector	6	50
Age – late 20's	5	42
Age – 30's	4	33
Age – 40+	3	25
Graduated last 5 years	8	67
Graduated 5–10 years ago	4	33
Member of ALIA	1	8
Member other prof. assoc.	2	17
Member of union	9	75
No memberships	2	17

Why have so few graduates chosen to join ALIA? Reasons varied from active disagreement with ALIA's directions or disinterest due to working in non-library sectors, to little awareness of ALIA's services and the perception that membership is too expensive.

The Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) was introduced in 1988/89. Allowing for different courses and changing fees over the years, students under this scheme graduate/d with a debt of between $8000 and $20 000. We are all too aware that library work is not a highly paid profession, and graduates are at the lower end of this scale. It is only reasonable to expect that a recent graduate on low pay with a HECS debt would be very conscious of the value received for every dollar spent.

It seems that ALIA is not offering the services that recent graduates value. The suggestion that they buy but they don't join (*inCite* May 2000) appears ludicrous in view of the high proportion of union memberships. When asked if they were members of the union, respondents often expressed surprise and replied 'of course'. Union membership is considered very important even though it is twice as expensive as joining ALIA. Although ALIA also provides industrial advice and support, respondents were either unaware or had less confidence in ALIA compared with their union. It seems they are happy to join a group offering the services they value.

So what types of services might newer members of our profession value? High on the list of issues raised during Australian Library Week was the change in management thinking over recent years. Many articles and speakers noted the decline in job security and the need for employee independence in managing a career path. This is the management mantra preached by today's gurus and affects all employees, not just graduates. These factors combined with workplace movement toward Enterprise Bargaining, Certified Agreements and Australian Workplace Agreements leave little doubt as to why industrial services are highly valued. Perhaps this is one of a number of markets ALIA has yet to fully explore.

In this management environment, services such as Continuing Professional Development are undeniably important. However they are certainly aimed at the longer-serving members of our profession. (I can tell you the last thing on my mind, upon graduation, was more study!) It is not easy to strike a balance between serving current members and attracting new members who may have different needs.

With concerted research and a bit of luck, I uncovered information about the recently released *My mentoring diary* and a brochure of *Tips and tricks for the new graduates*. Both are excellent. Were these (or similar) products available from ALIA when I graduated at the end of 1998? If so, then the problem lies more in poor promotional strategies than inadequate products and services. When I asked long-standing current members, 'What are the benefits of joining ALIA? Why would I want to be a member?' their answers were vague and unconvincing. Perhaps inertia, not solidarity, keeps them members. The Association's best advertising should be its members. Strategies promoting ALIA to new graduates should take account of this.

A search of the ALIA website on the term 'graduate' failed to return much useful information. Similar searches on Australian state library websites proved equally frustrating — even general employment information was often difficult to find. This brings me to the next and possibly most important question. Are library graduates even working in libraries?

Among those surveyed, there was general consensus that library jobs are difficult to get and graduate positions are few and far between. 'Waiting for someone to die' were oft-repeated words. This piece of the puzzle fits smoothly, considering 'library workers are, on average, older than the total Australian workforce and older than the average of the public service' (*inCite* April 2000). The Public Service has recognised the problem of its demographic imbalance and stepped up its graduate programs. You can visit the website of almost any Commonwealth department and easily locate information on graduate recruitment. The National Library of Australia, however, does not have a graduate program. Graduates recruited by other departments can apply for staff exchange to the National Library of Australia, but is that too little, too late?

April's *Frontline* asked, 'Where are the graduates who continue to pour out

of library courses?' The suggestion was that they are working in various information jobs. This is most likely the case if they cannot find library jobs. Of those surveyed who now work in other information sectors, only one has worked in a library since graduation.

It seems the sectors that catch the graduates get to keep them, to the loss of the library profession. The single respondent who is an ALIA member joined after graduation thinking it would help her get a job. This respondent is now working in a non-library information sector — after completing a non-library graduate program. Apart from practical course work she has never worked in a library and is considering switching to the association for her 'new' profession.

In this sense, ALIA's membership statistics could be the warning bells for a more alarming trend. If new graduates are not even entering the profession, who will be qualified to fill the many vacancies expected when ALIA's aging membership retires in ten to fifteen years? (*Quill* July 2000) No pro-active graduate could be expected to work ten to fifteen years as a library assistant, waiting for a vacancy — no matter how committed they are to the profession!

Contrary to Browne's suggestion, those who have managed to secure a professional library position are very dedicated to their vocation, its goals

and ideals. They do not see ALIA membership as a pre-requisite for active professional involvement.

Although they may not have joined, graduates are attending conferences, networking with current members and being as active as they can at a local level and within their own organisation. Some, who can not afford to join just yet, take advantage of their employer's corporate membership in order to participate. These librarians are taking ALIA's issues and objectives back to the workplace and the community. It is possible to advance the cause of librarianship through means other than association membership. Indeed, some non-members are actually more professionally active than are others, who pay their annual fee and give no more thought to the matter. The fact is — ALIA is failing to attract new graduates as members. This is not a reason to question the professional loyalty of new graduates. It should be stimulus for ALIA's continuing development to serve a changing profession.

Recent decades have seen many social changes and various kinds of affirmative action. Consequently, many recent graduates are baby-boomers. From this small preliminary survey, the age of graduates does not appear to have a strong correlation with membership. Drawing a line based on age (baby-boomers vs generation X as Browne suggests) is divisive and poten-

tially insulting. If membership continues to fall, ALIA would do better looking at broader social changes (rather than stereotypes) and adapting its services accordingly.

These results indicate that further research and quick action are required. ALIA must determine which services are important to its changing potential membership. It must then develop and promote these products and services effectively. Examples may include reaching graduates through a special page on the website or a regular segment in *inCite*. Have universities send a complimentary issue containing special promotional material to graduating students at the end of each semester. Pursue services such as mentoring by offering a register or placement scheme. Ask members to write articles for university publications, demonstrating the value of ALIA as a vehicle for networking. Create cheaper categories of membership for students or those not currently working in the profession. Also important is the creation and promotion of graduate programs in both the public and private sectors to keep new professionals in the profession.

The professional association is valuable to all of us, individually and collectively. Like any living thing, it must reassess its environment, adapt and evolve over time. ALIA must take positive action to ensure it endures. ■

Perth Western Suburbs Councils create a single library network

Local governments in the Western suburbs of Perth have co-ordinated information technology efforts to produce a single regional public library network. The five libraries in the western suburbs now provides library patrons with access to a combined database in excess of 150 000 items.

For the first time in Western Australia, enrolling in one library will instantly confer membership across libraries operated by six local governments.

Library patrons will be able to reserve any item in the network, renew their loans and check their own membership details from any library in the network.

The network has been created by a

co-operative initiative of the Town of Claremont, Town of Cottesloe, Town of Mosman Park, City of Nedlands, Shire of Peppermint Grove and the City of Subiaco.

The network is a co-operative arrangement, with administration of the system co-ordinated by a committee of the managing librarians from each Council. The City of Nedlands host and maintain the central servers for the service. Costs are shared on a per library basis.

The Amlib InfoVision software for the library service maximises local control over library operations. This enables each of library to maintain local policies and practices to suit their community needs. At the same time access

to the network maximises the benefit of sharing central resources.

The joint tender process demonstrated that a regional solution would be more cost-effective for each of the Councils than continuing as separate library services.

The network is not the final step in the project. The Councils are now working towards the imminent launch of the regional library network on the internet to provide patrons with on-line catalogue access from the World Wide Web.

Further information about the library network can be obtained by speaking to the managing librarian at any of the Councils in the Perth Western Suburbs. ■