

Champion of intellectual freedom

Softly-spoken but persuasive, university librarian at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) Alex Byrne has defended persecuted Cuban intellectuals and succeeded in freeing a jailed Chinese librarian.

A champion of intellectual freedom around the world, Alex Byrne has just been elected to the governing body of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA).

The head of the UTS library is the only Australian among the twelve elected members of the board, which has members from every continent. Historically IFLA was dominated by northern Europeans and North Americans, but that is changing.

'I hope to continue to reinforce the process of IFLA becoming a global body, so it can respond to issues throughout the world, especially in developing countries,' Mr Byrne said. 'I want to consolidate the intellectual freedom work, to get people to see that there is a world-wide body that can defend their interests.'

'Books are burnt, libraries are destroyed, librarians imprisoned. From a library point of view we need to put our hands up, and say this is not right, stop and think again.'

Alex Byrne has been a committed member of IFLA for ten years. He has previously chaired the standing committee for university libraries. In 1997, he led the establishment within IFLA of an initiative for Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE).

As chair of FAIFE, Alex guided the new committee and office, developed policy papers, and responded to complaints about intellectual violations, ranging from intimidation of people running independent libraries in Cuba, to the imprisonment of a librarian in China who was collecting old newspapers on the Cultural Revolution. 'With the help of other organisations, we got him out,' Alex said.



Chosen in a postal vote by 1200 voters, Alex Byrne's election is a great honour. Organisations such as UNESCO consult IFLA, the peak body for library matters worldwide. Established in 1927, IFLA deals with university libraries, special purposes facilities such as mobile libraries, activities, services to blind and handicapped, educational services, the process of cataloguing, and acquisitions.

With headquarters at the Hague in the Netherlands, IFLA has about 1750 member associations and institutions, from 153 countries around the world.

IFLA's work for intellectual freedom is gathering pace. Alex has just spent two weeks in Boston at the first meeting of the new governing body. At that meeting, a panel discussed intellectual freedom in Cuba. Some argued passionately that independent libraries were being repressed. Others just as passionately that Cuban libraries and people were suffering as a result of the forty-year-old United States embargo on Cuba. Resolutions urging action on both aspects of the issue went to the Council meeting. ■

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