

Sourcing research in the sector

ALIA National Office develops research database

ALIA recently committed itself to building a research and data collection resource for the information sector. In her December 'Directline' column in *inCite*, executive director, Jennefer Nicholson, foreshadowed the development of such a research database by ALIA's National Office. This project aims to provide a significant and relevant resource for all Australian library and information professionals.

The ALIA initiative will gather together information sources on the Australian library and information sector, with details stored by the National Office and accessible to members.

The database will particularly focus on information sources covering:

- statistical data, including information on users and issues of information technology;
- innovative practice in the sector;
- research within the sector, including projects identifying benchmarks;
- legislation and government policy impacting on the sector;
- relevant government reports and parliamentary inquiries;
- reports commissioned within the sector;
- reports from other information sector associations; and
- general social trends, particularly those relating to the work of the sector.

With the aim of providing background for the development of the database, ALIA's National Office recently developed a scoping paper to pinpoint existing information sources in the sector. From this preparatory work, it became clear that some sections of the Australian library and information sector are comprehensively documented. Public libraries in Australia are generally well documented, with relevant data from most states being readily available and relatively up to date. Thanks to the work of the Council of Australian University Librarians, information on university libraries is also comprehensive and available online. TAFE libraries are currently developing a national information-sharing resource. And some highly specialised areas of the sector, such as libraries attached to theological colleges, have also gathered and published comprehensive national information.

The scoping paper also highlighted areas of the library and information sector

where little co-ordinated information is publicly available. Most libraries keep information on their operations but do not always collate or publish data beyond their own institutions — especially the case with special libraries. Many innovative practices adopted in libraries are not widely publicised and are therefore difficult to identify. Even when comprehensive information is available, it can often be difficult to compare libraries, as banks of data being collected and collated are not always standardised.

Reports of particular relevance to the Australian library and information sector, both those produced by government, particularly the federal government, and reports produced by the sector, have been documented in the paper. The reports produced in the past five years were comprehensively identified in the paper, which also noted particularly significant reports produced over the last century.

The scoping paper managed to identify a significant body of information, providing a substantial base for the building of a research resource. The next step for ALIA National Office, currently under way, is to work on specifications for information technology to manage the database. Potential sources of a controlled vocabulary specific to the library and information sector are also being examined.

As the research resource is developed, it will be essential to ensure its currency and to broaden its information base. ALIA members are asked to assist by providing data that they produce or collect. The resource will thereby be a point through which members can readily share their information with the broader sector. Statistics, reports, research or other information relating to the Australian library and information sector, which might be of relevance to this project, should be forwarded to Marie Murphy at ALIA National Office (e-mail marie.murphy@alia.org.au).

Apart from assisting ALIA members to share information, the research database will be of general benefit to the Australian library and information sector. It will provide the Association with readily available data about the constituency it represents to disseminate, particularly, to government, policy-making bodies and the wider community. However, it will also be a resource owned by the whole of the Association and one whose quality and coverage will benefit from ongoing input by all members of the Association. ■

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