

AUSTRALIANS ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

This international engagement issue of inCite has garnered interest from ALIA members in Australia and overseas, even emailed on the run between airport lounges. You will read about colleagues taking our professional expertise and support to our neighbour nations, and others who have travelled to bring back home the best practice and experience to incorporate into our own library systems.

Ours is a collegiate profession, inveterate networkers in our daily duties as well as in our endeavours to be the best we can be. For library and information professionals just starting to

think about extending your efforts beyond Australia, some who have travelled before you share in these pages their memories, experiences, and their top tips for getting started.

ALIA is a proud member of IFLA, and we can count amongst our membership a number who have taken active roles on the international stage. As you read, you will see a common thread – that to step up to the international arena, whether to learn or to share, invariably produces great satisfaction and renews a passion for the profession. And amazing photo albums.

Librarians without borders

What do lush tropical rainforests, pristine white sand beaches, towering snow-capped mountains, raging ice-cold rivers and verdant undulating fields have in common? In my experience, the practice of librarianship. Fellow ALIA members have recently employed their professional expertise in Samoa and Vanuatu. My experience of crossing borders as a librarian has taken me to Cameroon (1992-1999), France (off and on 1992-1999) and, most recently, Tajikistan (July-August 2010).



Ian Stoodley, librarian at large

In Tajikistan “libraries without walls” took on a new nuance. Faced with technology infrastructure and support challenges, we decided to host the library database out-of-country, in the Ukraine. This provided up-to-date server space and software expertise, and transformed the library into a thoroughly international venture.

Part of the fulfilment that comes with cross-cultural librarianship is finding ways over (or around) hurdles we do not normally face in our familiar Western environment. Infrastructure inadequacies come immediately to mind (for example, lack of reliable access to electricity and internet), though my observation is that those are less of a problem as time goes on. Other challenges include language barriers (communicating with co-workers, understanding the library resources and manipulating operating systems with unfamiliar interface languages), limited funding, and unpredictable skills and expectations of local staff.

The benefits of professional engagement in this environment are multiple. There is nothing so focussing as the prospect of passing on the essentials of librarianship in the space of

six weeks (in one instance for me, one week). This forces an evaluation of what it means to manage information in the new context. Close work with local colleagues draws you into the culture more profoundly than a more fleeting tourist visit. Then there are all the exotic sights, tastes, smells and people supplying ample material for many stories and reflections into the future... and which enrich you as a person. It also provides an opportunity to contribute in situations which are often overlooked back home and an avenue to practice an outward-looking professionalism.

For each challenge, solutions are available. This year, I appreciated more than ever the benefits of email communication, open source software and remote hosting.



On the road to a library

However, the transition from perceiving a challenge to finding a solution was at times a stressful, intimidating and tedious one.

It has occurred to me that more could be done to promote cross-cultural librarianship and offer support to those heading out on such ventures. To this end, I propose we form an Australian 'Librarians without borders' (see the Canadian one at <http://lwb-online.org/>). If you're interested, please contact me at i.stoodley@qut.edu.au. Together we can achieve much in a diversity of circumstances, both in Australia and beyond.

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