

**Canberra Society of Editors
and
Australian Society of Indexers**

PARTNERSHIPS IN KNOWLEDGE

**First joint conference of indexers and editors,
Rydges Lakeside Hotel, Canberra, 20-23 April 2001**

Papers Day 3

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An innovative society needs indexers and editors

Professor Ian Chubb AO, President of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee

Thank you for your kind invitation for me to speak today. I know that part of the reason why I was asked to speak here today was because of your desire as a professional association to seek out more information about how to preserve and extend the professional training of indexing and editing through tertiary level study, including university level courses.

This desire is a very admirable one which I would like to encourage and I will do my best to impart some of the little I know about indexing and editing in Australia's universities.

I have a somewhat broader main theme that relates to the wider importance of all professions to the development of Australia as a knowledge-based or innovative society—a theme which has encouraged me to entitle my speech 'An Innovative Society Needs Indexers and Editors'.

But allow me first to address some of the more particular issues of your conference as they relate to universities.

With respect to the theme of your conference 'Partnerships in Knowledge', universities have demonstrated that they are increasingly open to partnerships with professional organisations, whether this be through formal arrangements such as accreditation or more informal arrangements for the provision of continuing education and the provision of internships and work experience for their students.

The teaching of the theory and practice of indexing is incorporated into most information management degrees taught within Schools of Communication or Schools of Library and Information Studies.

At undergraduate level of course this area is developed in conjunction with broader educational aims. So this is an area in which universities already play a role.

I am not aware of the degree of specific interaction between universities and your two professional societies but I would say that undergraduate courses can only benefit from your greater input.

The situation at postgraduate level is somewhat different. There may be room for specialised courses, say at Graduate Certificate or Masters level.

However, these days it is difficult to secure HECS places for such courses and so their viability depends very much on the capacity to pay fees and obtain reasonable numbers.

Universities might also be interested in the development of specialised short courses in conjunction with your two societies.

Having your professional endorsement would certainly be helpful in marketing any such courses.

The teaching of editing at undergraduate level is usually part of broader courses in professional writing.

For example, the University of Canberra has a Bachelor of Arts in Professional Writing and also a Graduate Diploma in Professional Communication (Professional Writing). Both, I am advised, include the teaching of editing skills.

There are more specialised courses at Graduate Diploma level.

I noticed from the web while doing some background for today's event when I was looking for relevant courses being offered by universities that there is quite specific acknowledgment of cooperation between universities and the relevant professional associations and the industry in this area.

Macquarie University, for example, has a Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and MA in Editing and/or publishing and editing. RMIT has a Graduate Diploma in Publishing/Editing. The relevant web sites indicate that both have been designed after input from a planning committee representing the Australian Publishers Association and the Sydney Society of Editors, or in the case of RMIT, the Melbourne Society of Editors.

So professional societies such as your two societies should approach universities who have an interest in your fields. I am sure that any such approach will get a positive response. It is usually best to write to a head of department or a Dean.

It gets back to the point I made earlier that overall universities are keen to establish partnerships with professional bodies and are keen to have input into their courses.

The whole question of indexers and editors moving from what has been a traditionally in-house training approach towards a combination of university or TAFE-based training together with professional experience is part of the wider theme of the critical importance of professional skills that I would now like to turn

This has been a path taken by all professions at one time or another over the past thousand years, with accountants and journalists—I hope the comparisons are not too invidious—perhaps two of the most recent.

And speaking of journalists and accountants ... I read last week in the Higher Education Supplement of the *Australian* that a survey of student perceptions indicates that, in the minds of students at least, the old 'bean-counter' image of accountants is a thing of the past.

The researcher, Beverley Jackling—a senior lecturer at Deakin university—found that the stereotype of the accountant as—quote—'*introverted, cautious, methodical, systematic, antisocial and boring*'—unquote—has now been replaced by a sleek new dynamic image of accounting fuelled by new demands from employers for graduates with generic skills in written and oral communication, creative thinking and problem solving.

Forgive me if I'm wrong, but it wouldn't surprise me if just like accountants, indexers and editors had not sometimes felt piqued by outmoded stereotypes that failed to understand the changing nature of the professional requirements of your skills.

I don't actually intend to spend too much time on pondering the all-important post-modern question of whether indexers and editors, like accountants today are really cool.

Instead I intend to argue that what we do know is that whatever the stereotype, there is no dispute that indexers and editors add critical value to business and government administration.

And I am going to go further and state that in today's world, good indexers and editors are crucial to the realisation of Australia as a genuinely innovative society.

In other words, no matter what outdated and disconnected impressions may linger in popular consciousness about

our professional cadre of indexers and editors, or accountants, or lawyers, or managers, teachers, philosophers and others, we all need to understand that the substance of what they do is crucial to our emerging national needs for knowledge-based industries, as surely as are our biotechnologists and others at the leading edge of scientific innovation.

And further, that along with the rest of the intellectual firepower that goes with being an innovative society, Australia will have to find ways to ensure that we have sufficient numbers of them, properly trained, if they are to play their part in realising our national aspirations.

I'd hate to think that we ever gave up thinking about what sort of society we want Australia to be and what we want to bequeath to future generations.

In this our centenary year, however, it seems more appropriate than ever.

Dr Helen Irving, the Director of the 1901 Centre at the University of Technology in Sydney, writing in the *Australian* on the eve of the centenary, noted that while our federationist forebears were utilitarians who regarded material benefit for the greatest number as fundamental to what they wanted to achieve, this was not what drove them forward.

More than material benefit, Irving argued, the federationists '*wanted greatness for Australia and Australia's statesmen, international status, power, wealth and the most sublime of democracies*'.

I suspect many of us may now be suspicious of the notion of national *greatness* and of *power* but in a hundred years time, whatever our new formulation, will our great-grandchildren or our great-great grandchildren be able to look back and say that in 2001 we still possessed lofty aspirations—or will they say we were content to accept a mediocre vision or worse, a mediocre outcome and a mediocre future for our country?

A frank appraisal of the geo-political outlook suggests a less than cheerful prospect for Australia—unless we are truly good at what we do.

We have few natural allies. We don't have a population large enough to sustain our quality of life with ease or to sustain our own producers, and so create work.

We are hardly a large enough market to be of critical interest to foreign producers. And there is no natural reason (by contrast with any possible political reason) for Australia to be a significant part of dynamic international groupings.

If we are to prosper and to provide a quality of life worthy of our citizens we will need to look after ourselves. And, just as our forebears embraced ambitious goals when they decided it was time the nation began to look after itself, so we will have to be unsatisfied with unambitious goals and average performances.

We have heard a lot about Australia as *a Clever Country*, or *a Knowledge Nation* or an *innovative society*—and it is important that we do.

If I were asked to describe an *intelligent* country (or a knowledge-based society or whatever expression we use) I would argue that it would be one that is prosperous, civilised, culturally rich and socially just.

It is one that will be wisely governed and led; and one that will not let the circumstances of birth be a major obstacle to personal advancement because it will be understood that progress will come from the development and application of the talents of all the citizens.

It will be a nation with a focus on quality, and it will encourage and support high aspirations.

The intelligent country will generate new discoveries, develop its people and support all fields of learning.

Some of these fields will, of course, give rise to invention, innovation and economic wealth.

Other fields will lead to yet better understanding of civilisations past and the generation of new literary, artistic and spiritual wealth.

Still others, like indexing and editing will ensure that we are capable of accessing and properly articulating the product of this intellectual wealth.

If this is the kind of society we want to bequeath to our children and to theirs—then we need to ensure that we provide accessible, high quality education, with the right mix of educational opportunities.

This is not a unique call on us.

All nations depend increasingly on three critical elements: new discoveries, highly trained personnel, and expert knowledge.

It is obviously of crucial importance that as a nation we invest and invest strongly in cutting edge research but if we hope to benefit from what this investment may bring, we have to have the people who can exploit the discoveries from our research endeavours—the professional managers and finance analysts; and we need the philosophers and teachers, and the indexers and editors to help articulate and transmit new knowledge.

Without knowledge in-depth we can never be a knowledge society.

A narrowly based innovative capacity is no capacity at all.

The AVCC has made this argument in detail in a major discussion paper *Our Universities: Our Future*.

As well as arguing why we need such an approach, the paper explains how we have begun to fall down in our capacity to support an innovative society and the dangers our deteriorating capacity poses for Australia's future prosperity.

In case the funding crisis in our universities are not known to you, let me detail briefly explain a few of the key facts.

First, participation. In 1983 there were just under 350,000 students in Australia's higher education institutions. In 2000 there were almost exactly 700,000.

While participation in education has gone up, however, national spending on education—public and private—as a proportion of GDP has been on a steady decline.

From a high of around 6.8 per cent in the late 1970s it has fallen to just above 5 per cent today. Not a good trend for a knowledge-based society.

Since 1996, Commonwealth funding for all education as a percentage of GDP has declined from 2.1 per cent to 1.6 per cent and is set to fall further.

A large measure of this decline has been cut a 6 per cent cut in operating grants to universities.

This has been exacerbated for universities by the lack of any additional funding over three rounds of enterprise bargaining which has meant that universities have had to divert around another 15 per cent of their revenues towards salary increases.

In other words since 1996, we have had to fund a 20 per cent decline in revenues.

In terms of per student funding, the government contribution has declined steadily since 1983 when it was \$12,507 per student. Today it is less than \$8,905.

Most of the burden created by this diminishing government contribution, has gone onto students who, in HECS, now have one of the highest student financial burdens in any developed nation.

And as such there is no real scope (nor justification—given the estimated balance of public and private benefits from university study) in raising their burden higher.

The amount of average government funding for our universities is now around 50 per cent or lower—for some it is below 30 per cent.

In other words our so-called public universities receive less public funding than our private schools.

Some say that other commercial entities face similar indeed greater stringencies—we don't deny this but we do believe that the commercial analogy only suits universities so far.

Universities cannot meet national needs for new skills, and at the same time improve their product as a normal commercial business will, if this means cutting staff or lowering salaries so they cannot attract the best.

Australia's inability to retain its brightest minds—the brain drain—is already having a serious impact on our capacity to create and exploit new knowledge.

As for attracting the best from overseas or even our own industries, this has become chronically difficult for universities, and so even imparting new knowledge has become a challenging proposition.

The crucial statistic in the area of quality outcomes is student : staff ratios.

These have steadily increased by about 35 per cent over the last decade moved from an average of 14.5 to 1 to around 19.4 to 1 in the last decade.

This is significant enough but in some areas—some central to our ideas of modern innovation—the situation is horrendous.

The Chair of the AVCC Information Policy Committee, Professor Lauchlan Chipman, explained to a conference last week, industry forecasts of our need for IT&T graduates estimate a shortfall of up to 10,000 over the next five years.

The drop in the value of our dollar means we can't buy in the experts so naturally we will need to look to universities training the required numbers.

But if that is so we are going to have to come up with a way of attracting more IT specialists into academia because the staff : student ratio in that key discipline is close to 52 to 1!

So while we have been grateful for the Government's funding initiatives in *Backing Australia's Ability*—initiatives that must be seen as a modest first step in re-establishing Australia's research position in the OECD—we must also recognise that this funding addresses only part of our education base.

Let me be quite clear about this, our view is that if we don't significantly improve the quality of teaching and learning outcomes in our universities by investing in more and better paid academics, and cutting edge learning technologies, so that we can get our class sizes down and get the best people into academia then the money that we do invest in cutting edge research will not lead to sustainable knowledge-based industries.

Our view is one that ties all professional groups, including indexers and editors, directly into the Australia's prospects as an innovative society.

Put simply, if we cannot convince the Government to improve the teaching and learning outcomes for the professionalism that will support new knowledge-based research industries, then they will be unsustainable.

The drain of our best minds overseas will continue, and will we not have the money to replace them—our balance of payments will worsen.

We tend to forget it these days, but the last time the US faced an economic downturn it was a far more serious one than the one they are facing now.

In the mid-1980s the US was floundering in an economic quicksand—Japanese and Korean imports seemed unstoppable and US business management was seen as ineffectual in the face of their onslaught.

At that time, in response to their crisis the US was fortunate in having some very wise heads start thinking deeply about where their country's strategic competitive

advantage (to use the management economist's term) lay.

The White House Science Council issued a report in 1986 that focused on the partnership between Government, universities and industry. In it, these advisers wrote that *'In this country, we are uniquely dependent upon our universities for both basic research and higher education—perhaps our greatest strength here has been our insistence that the two are inseparable. The heart of the university research system'* the report went on *'is the parallel education of students...'*

Moreover, *'the health of the entire spectrum of American education'*—and remember this is the White House Science Council— *'from chemistry to computer science to the classics is important to our national future. The nation can ill afford generations of scientists and engineers unable to appreciate the economic and social consequences of their work or the underpinning values and moral judgments that are the primary focus of the humanist.'*

Substitute 'indexers and editors' for 'humanist' in that last sentence and you will get what I am trying to say in the title of my speech today...

In our discussion paper, the AVCC has argued that a case for around a 20 per cent increase in base grant funding over six years can be sustained.

This is around one-third of the funding announced recently for Defence, and as such we regard it as well within reasonable limits of fiscal responsibility.

Moreover, universities need to have a greater degree of policy and funding stability and predictability.

Too many people in universities already spend too much time responding to changed rules, supplying statistics, adjusting, applying endlessly for the basic funds we need simply to do their jobs, responding to frequent reviews or requests for information...while all the time, more

and more funds are tied or project-driven or supplied in packets.

We are slowly being made average. All Australians will suffer if that continues.

Enrolling an average number of students into universities of average quality, supported by government at average levels, would be an appalling outcome.

Being in the middle of the OECD expenditure tables on education, on research and on development, on information and communications output, is simply to fail.

Our view moreover is that the time we have available to us to get things right is now short. Other countries have already made the decision about the role of their universities and have started to finance them accordingly.

We know that the pace of change is such that if our universities get too far behind those in other countries, we will not catch up—the cost of catching up, indeed, is going up to the point where it will be impossible to get there if the gap is too big.

There have been some commentators who have said we should go back to only letting the top 5 per cent of school-leavers into our universities—but I think this profoundly misunderstands the changing nature of society's knowledge requirements.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, I don't think this is either what most Australians want or should want for their children and their country.

I'm sure our constitutional forebears would have recognised and respected our highest aspirations, and it is something we would do well to learn soon if we wish to preserve the material and spiritual wealth of our sublime democracy and lay the foundation for our next hundred years.

Thank you.

A survey of education and training needs for editors in Australia

Renée Otmar

I was invited to participate in the Partnerships in Knowledge conference, held in Canberra 20–23 April. It was the first joint Australian conference of indexers and editors, and was organised and hosted by the Australian Society of Indexers and the Canberra Society of Editors. The organisers did themselves and their professions proud: the conference was a resounding success.

Once we editors allowed ourselves to come down from the emotional high of it being a 'first-ever', we were able to use the conference to help us move beyond the boundaries of profession, state and specialisation. By the end of the conference we had moved ahead far enough that Victoria's own Janet Mackenzie was inspired to move a motion from the conference to the Council of Australian Societies of Editors (CASE). Should CASE take up the challenge, its members will be meeting within the next two months to consider matters of national importance for editors.

My presentation at the conference was as an education and training representative for CASE. I made the following presentation as part of a panel invited to address education and training needs for Australian editors and indexers. Although the session and presentation was entitled 'A survey of...', I must point out that my presentation should in no way be considered a survey by the definition 'detailed examination in order to present a comprehensive view'. My 'research' involved discussion with the president and/or representative/s of each state or territory's society of editors on her personal and representative views on the following broad questions:

- What education and training is currently available to editors?
- Are these considered to be adequate? Why or why not?
- What is needed?
- What (in broad terms) should a course cover at undergraduate and postgraduate levels?

For the most part, during discussion of the first three questions it became obvious that many editors and educators across the country believe that the education and

training available to editors and aspiring editors are grossly inadequate and under-resourced. The anger and discontent many of my informants expressed over this issue was overwhelming.

What follows is a brief account of the information and opinions I gathered during my discussions. My grateful thanks to everyone who took the time to share her opinions and ideas with me. A big thank-you also to the Committee of the Society of Editors (Victoria) for its support.

Vocational education and training for editors in Australia

Excluding the states of Western Australia and Tasmania, and the Northern Territory, vocational education and training for editors in Australia is provided mainly within the TAFE system. In South Australia, the only course at this level available to aspiring editors is the TAFE-provided Professional Writing Certificate IV. The TAFE system offers certificates, graduate certificates and diplomas in editing or in professional writing and editing. These types of courses provide the knowledge and skills considered to be suitable for entry level positions, such as trainee editor or editorial assistant.

In the university system, editing as a topic is a component of, or is embedded within, undergraduate arts degrees in professional writing or communication; for example, a bachelor of arts with a major in communication, professional communication, journalism or media studies. Some literature degree courses offer major or minor streams in writing for professional purposes.

After completing requirements for a TAFE or undergraduate award, aspiring editors might gain further training on the job—if they are able to land a rare in-house traineeship or similar position. Those who aren't so lucky tend to seek work in publishing-related fields and, if they are not discouraged or lured into other professions, gradually build up the Australia, editors and aspiring editors have sole responsibility for their own vocational and professional development.

Professional development for editors

Universities in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria offer postgraduate diplomas in editing and publishing—one each in NSW and Queensland and two in Victoria. Candidates for these programs usually are required to be working in the publishing industry (2 years +). Most graduates are prepared for higher-level entry to the profession.

Except for the Northern Territory, short courses, seminars and workshops are run by state/territory societies of editors, sometimes in association with TAFEs or other institutions, or in the case of Western Australia, Women in Publishing. The emphasis is usually on practical, usable skills participants can apply immediately, such as copy-editing and proofreading skills and grammar refreshers.

Short courses and workshops are also offered irregularly by schools and other private bodies such as the Australian Publishers' Association. Examples of topics on offer are acquisitions editing, project management and commissioning other professionals.

What is needed?

In my informal survey of the states, I was overwhelmed by the dissatisfaction of my colleagues with the education and training available to editors.

The perception of exactly what is needed differs from state to state, and depends largely on the size of the publishing market in each particular state or territory. While it is clear that it would not be viable to offer the same volume of education and training in, say, every capital city, there appears to be general agreement across the states and territories on three key points:

1. Vocational education and training for editors in Australia is inadequate—in terms of both available courses and content.
2. There appears to be a great deal of confidence that the TAFE system provides the best training model for our needs. As vocational education and training for editors, TAFE courses are considered to be practical and experiential—'hands-on'. In the states in which the TAFE system is active in providing courses in editing and professional writing, such as in Victoria,

Queensland and New South Wales, there is the feeling that what we need is a comprehensive program driven by industry and provided by TAFE.

However, the higher education system is still considered to be appropriate for higher-entry level, or middle management, and in some states (for example, Victoria and NSW) there is some feeling that more courses are needed—though often this sentiment is tempered with a pessimism about the availability of work for these editors once they graduate. Whilst we can all point to an increasing need, it is difficult to gauge the demand, now and in the future, for professional editors. Australia does not have a large and well-defined publishing industry sector, and what we do have is concentrated largely in Melbourne and Sydney.

3. The most pressing issue for editors right now is that of accreditation. There is a resounding cry for the accreditation of editors within a national system, and a great deal of hope that the societies of editors will be able to pull it off in the very near future. There is a perception that our future as a profession that is to be taken seriously – in terms of education and training, remuneration and our role in the publishing process – appears to be at stake.

As mentioned above, I encountered some pessimism about the future of our profession among some editors and other publishing professionals with an interest in editing. There is some feeling that editors as a professional group will decline, and perhaps disappear, due to lack of demand, if the 'knowledge industries' are not supported in their development. The emerging knowledge industries being 'not just about information, but also about the integration and application of it to real problems, and language is the structure upon which it is built'. South Australia's Holly McCausland put it rather bluntly when she wrote to me: 'Changes in technology mean also that editing needs to be reconceptualised from a stage in an industrial process of production filled by an appropriately labelled occupation to a set of skills essential within a team engaged in a project—i.e. the role and functions of editing might be shared among team

members rather than residing in one person... The moves to knowledge industries that are taking place in the UK and Europe are likely to pass us by' [if the knowledge industries are not encouraged and supported to develop].

Personally, I do not share this pessimism.

Where to from here?

In summary, my informal survey indicates that editors want the following (in this order):

- a unified national system of accreditation
- an approach to vocational education and training with a national focus
- vocational education and training specifically designed for editors.

The *Australian Standards for Editing Practice* (CASE 2001) document took two years to be developed, from the initial discussion in Melbourne in 1998 to the launch in April 2001. A national system of accreditation for editors could take even longer to develop and establish—which is why we have to start now. If we editors want to set the course for our profession, we must take the helm. The buck stops here. We must take the initiative, and we must lead the way for those who come after us with a model of which we can be proud.

There is only one way to start, and that is to get started. Volunteers are needed for a thankless task. I am prepared to throw my hat into the ring—are you?

Vocational development for editors in Australia

State/ Territory	Post-graduate	Under-graduate	TAFE	Private	SocEds involvement
ACT	-	-	√	-	√
NSW	√	-	√√	√	√√√
NT	-	-	-	-	-
QLD	√	-	√√	-	√√
SA	-	-	-	-	-
TAS	-	-	-	-	-
VIC	√√	-	√√√	√	√
WA	-	-	√*	-	√

* in partnership with Women in Publishing

Professional development for editors in Australia

State/ Territory	SocEds	Schools/ Institutions	Private
ACT	√	-	√
NSW	√	-	√
NT	-	-	-
QLD	√	-	√
SA	√	-	-
TAS	√	-	-
VIC	√	√	√
WA	√*	-	√

* in partnership with Women in Publishing

Registration of database indexers

Sandra Henderson

During this conference I've heard some interesting comments to do with registration.

During John Simkins' session on Friday afternoon someone asked 'Has the quality of book indexing improved in Australia since registration of back-of-book indexers has been around?' In the same session Alan Walker noted that in the US there are significant numbers of indexers who wouldn't touch registration with a barge-pole.

I've heard several editors express a view that development of a system of accreditation of editors is a path they must go down. Last night Max McMaster said, in accepting his Medal, that there are a number of very competent indexers who are not members of the Society (and who by implication are therefore not eligible to be considered for the medal). Equally, I know of competent database indexers who are not members of the Society. Perhaps the lack of a registration process is one reason these people have for not joining—one of the things they can point to as a failing of the Society when they think 'What's in it for me?'

So what is it we are trying to achieve and why?

What's registration and what are the benefits? Why do the database indexers want to belong to this secret sub-society of 'registered indexers'? (The issue of web-indexer registration is no doubt just around the corner.) If an indexer is working as a freelance or in-house database indexer, meeting the requirements of their employer in terms of speed, quality and consistency, what does registration offer?

Registration in a professional sense can be defined as 'an impartial, third party endorsement of your knowledge and expertise by a respected professional body' (from the South African Board of Personnel Practice). Many other definitions mention the words 'assuring competence'. Being a registered indexer is not necessarily a guarantee for clients that all your indexing is of an excellent standard, but it should guarantee them that your indexing is of an acceptable standard and that you know what you are doing.

Registration is often linked to professionalism. In many jurisdictions it is illegal to practice as a doctor, lawyer, dentist, engineer and so on, if your name does not appear on a state or country register of like professionals, and the registration process is tied up with completion of recognised educational courses, some amount of professional experience, participation in ongoing continuing education, and acceptance of a professional code of conduct or code of ethics. Linked to this is a process by which registration may be withdrawn for unethical or incompetent practice.

However, there are also a range of occupations where registration is not mandatory, and some, like indexing, where even the basic educational achievement is not mandated. We are not the only occupation struggling with the issue of registration and how to achieve it. The peak bodies in those occupations wonder if they are indeed a profession, and see a registration process as a step in the direction of recognition as a profession.

Registration may be seen as a process which raises the status of the profession by assuring the client community about qualifications, standards and quality of practice. It is a step towards maintaining and gradually improving standards of practice, and it is to be hoped that the history of registration of book indexers has gradually improved the overall standard of book indexing in this country.

What happens in other societies?

In the UK there is a system of accreditation and registration of back-of-book indexers, with education criteria specified for the accreditation level, and registration as the higher level achievement. There is no accreditation of registration of database indexers, or web indexers—indeed these newer mutant varieties don't seem to be much in evidence in their society.

In the United States, as has been mentioned earlier in the conference, there is no system of accreditation or registration of indexers. As has also been said before at the conference, there is much opposition to the idea of any regulation. However, the

issue is not dead, it is raised at the conferences of the American Society of Indexers, and Kate Mertes is writing a paper on the issue for their conference next month (May 2001). She does not sound overly optimistic that anything will be achieved, but supporters of the concept do not want to let it die. The Canadians, similarly, have no system of registration.

Progress

For over twenty years AusSI has been registering back-of-book indexers. In fact the Society's constitution says that a register of indexers will be kept. It is the practice of the Society to recommend only those indexers who are registered. The lack of a process for the registration of database indexers thus places the Society in itself in an awkward position. There are no indexers registered as database indexers (although some registered back-of-book indexers such as Max are equally capable in the field of database indexing). So how can the Society recommend an indexer to an organisation seeking a database indexer (and the clients are generally organisations, not publishers as is the case with back-of-book indexers).

Indexers available is made online from the Society's web pages—and database indexers are listed—and people seeking a database indexer do use it as a means of locating possible indexers. If someone is contracted to do indexing because they are listed, and their work is not competent, this reflects badly on the Society despite any declarations that the listing does not imply recommendation for unregistered indexers.

Those of us who've been to Marysville, Robertson and Katoomba know that the issue of registration of database indexers has been raised at each of those conferences, at least in informal discussion sessions, with everyone going away muttering that it's all too hard.

However, after the most recent Hobart conference where it was discussed yet again, a small working group was convened (electronically) to work on developing a proposal. There were a succession of ideas and refinements passed around by email between the working group members (Garry, Max, Margaret and myself). We're now at the stage of having a proposal which needs the comments of the wider database indexing membership before we proceed any further.

What is being proposed?

The document as it stands starts with a statement of the purpose of registration. These are:

- To assist employers select suitable indexers for database work through a recognised accreditation process
- To provide a benchmark for database indexers to evaluate their own indexing skills and competencies
- To provide a measure of competence for the Society in recommending database indexers.

The more difficult issue, that of the criteria for assessment, has been the subject of much consideration, and will no doubt provoke much debate. The criteria suggested are:

- Education/training course attendance, e.g. appropriate indexing component in an information management course; specialised training in an AusSI database indexing/abstracting course
- Considerable experience in database indexing/abstracting of text/image material. This requires the use of both subject analysis as well as subject indexing. Subject cataloguing alone is not sufficient
- Assessment on sample. This would involve both:
 - subject analysis and assignment of keywords using both thesaurus and non-thesaurus tools
 - Abstracting.

It is suggested that the sample be two batches of ten records, one batch to be indexed using a general thesaurus (such as APAIS) and the other to be indexed using a specialist thesaurus. The applicant would have a choice of specialist thesaurus out of a limited group of options.

Not all of the above criteria would need to be met. A very experienced indexer may be exempted from one of the above.

Verification of education/training course attendance and/or database indexing experience would have to be provided, from educational and/or employer institutions.

There are, not unexpectedly, some problems with the criteria. The national committee of AusSI is concerned to keep some degree of parity with the registration for book indexing, and at present registration of book indexers is on a single criterion, although it has recently been

expanded somewhat. However, the basis of registration is still the examination of a completed index, and there is no requirement for educational qualifications or substantiation of significant experience.

There is no standard curriculum in educational institutions, and the indexing component of information management courses can vary from brief mentions to intensive practical work. The Society has no role in the accreditation of any courses in database indexing, so is it legitimate to base registration on attendance at a course. It is also the case that at least in the past, many database indexers were subjected to very informal in-house training, based on a single database, by people who had also received no formal training.

There are quite a few more-than-competent database indexers who've spent their whole career indexing for a single database, or working in a very specialised area. Is sample indexing using a generalist thesaurus a useful measure of their indexing skill in this case? Some indexers have worked for years with a database or databases which do not require abstracts—should they be disadvantaged by this?

There is also a proposal for continued professional development and re-registration after ten years. There are no such requirements for book indexers. Whatever the merits of a re-registration process for either book or database indexers, would the Society's limited number of assessors be able to cope with this? The reaction of the national committee was that trying to achieve this for book indexers would be impossible given the limited resources available in terms of assessors.

What of the opportunities for continued professional development? This is much easier for an indexer in a large government organisation where training and development are valued and funded, less

easy for those in other organisations or freelancing. The nature of some database indexing is also very specialised, limiting the value of many development opportunities.

It is proposed that a panel of three assessors carry out the process. How are these people to be chosen in the first instance? Who assesses the assessors? While there are quite a number of experienced database indexers in Canberra and Melbourne, the same is not true for Sydney or other centres. Does this matter? Would the panel assessors have to be physically present to administer a sample indexing process, or could this aspect be looked after by a single assessor?

As I thought about this I also wondered about some of the closely related activities undertaken by database indexers. These will include database management without actual indexing, a process of maintaining the database over time at a high level of consistency—not measured by the proposed criteria but a skill most experienced database indexer would be expected to have.

The development and maintenance of thesauri and authority control is also a key component and almost inseparable from the main work of an indexer or database manager. Even those using a thesaurus maintained elsewhere frequently undertake variant forms of thesaurus work—maintaining authority lists of terms used to enhance the thesaurus at a local level or to populate the other fields of a database. Should there be some recognition of this part of a database indexer's work?

As you can see this is not a cut-and-dried subject. What the Database Indexers Registration working group has done is think about the most pressing issues, put forward a proposal, and your comments are welcomed.