Collaboration in Australian Library Consortia

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Announced in the previous issue of *Collaborative Librarianship*, Ms. Rona Wade, CEO of UNILINC based in Sydney, Australia, was appointed to the Advisory Board of the Journal. UNILINC, a robust consortium serving 22 libraries of several types across Australia, offers a number of services including cataloging, electronic content loading and presentation, interlibrary loan and document delivery, training and shared online catalogs. Its most recent initiatives focus on next generation integrated library systems. For more information about UNILINC, see: http://www.unilinc.edu.au/.

The interview adds to the ongoing series of conversations with members of our Advisory Board.

CL: Could you speak to how library collaboration works in Australia?

Wade: As with libraries anywhere, libraries in Australia collaborate at many levels and in many ways.

The National Library of Australia is the preeminent nationwide agent for collaboration across all libraries. A key collaborative mechanism is the Libraries Australia service, which is a national data utility supplying MARC records. It is also a union catalog of holdings that in turn supports a nationwide interlibrary lending service through the Libraries Australia Document Delivery (LADD) service. The Australian digital library service, Trove, includes this national union catalog as well as e-resources, newspapers, photographs, and websites.

Also at the national level, the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) negotiates e-resource agreements on behalf of Australian and New Zealand Universities and other higher educa-tion institutions and undertakes other initiatives of national significance to university libraries in Australia.

As to formal independent entities set up as not-for-profit companies to facilitate and manage co-operation between institutions, there are two such organisations in Australia—CAVAL and UNILINC Limited. Both of these operations were established in the late 1970s to meet the needs of higher education. The formation of UNILINC was directly influenced by the development of OCLC, and indeed then OCLC President, Fred Kilgour, visited Sydney to help lobby the state government to approve the new organization. Both UNILINC and CAVAL are independent organisations established initially as shared cataloging operations using Australian software. After 1981, paths diverged with CAVAL opting to change systems and UNILINC further developing the local option.

UNILINC went on to implement an integrated library management system and OPAC in 1983. That shared system now uses Ex Libris Aleph and remains at the heart of UNILINC's operations. It is accompanied by a shared discovery service (Primo along with Primo Central and bX), link resolver (SFX), ERM (Verde) and DAM (DigiTool). These shared systems provide for optimum local control and autonomy while maximising opportunities to share data and library resources.

Like many American consortia, UNILINC and CAVAL have also branched out to extend member services to libraries and organisations outside the membership. These services include cataloging and shelf-ready services, consultancy services, web development, digitisation and project management services and, in the case of CAVAL, a cooperative storage facility.

CL: Are there any lessons American libraries should learn from your experiences?

Wade: Over the years UNILINC has certainly looked to the United States (US). The development of OCLC and regional networks in the US in the 1970s and early 1980s were an ongoing source of inspiration for UNILINC in areas such as shared cataloging, reciprocal borrowing, and database deals. By the same token UNILINC has been approached by libraries in the US and elsewhere for advice on data management, governance, and funding matters and about data sharing.

Under the constitution, the elected UNILINC Board of Directors must comprise a mix of librarians and other senior administrators from member institutions and people drawn from outside the membership with expertise in areas of relevance. This mix has worked well for UNILINC over the 36 years.

The other aspect that may be of interest is that there has never been state funding for UNILINC apart from an initial grant of $30,000 to convert two MARC databases created by two of the founding members. Neither has UNILINC depended upon membership fees to sustain its activities. Membership fees are set at $1,000 per annum and contribute less than 1% to revenues. All services provided by the UNILINC Office are fee-for-service except for the reciprocal borrowing scheme which receives administrative support but carries no fees. All new programs are financed out of reserves and there is an expectation they will be financially viable within a very short time.

In addition, membership in UNILINC is entirely voluntary. Members may leave and new members join. Members are required to use the shared ILMS system, but other than that they may take up whichever systems and services they wish.

CL: Could you elaborate on what you see as the top three or four key values of library collaboration?

Wade: I see more than three or four key values:

- Libraries must NEED to collaborate if long term collaboration is to be successful.

- Collaboration needs to result in a better outcome than could be achieved by going it alone.
- Collaboration needs trust.
- Often collaborating requires going beyond what is known.
- Collaboration fosters innovation. People working together give rise to new ideas - that is a given. Organisations such as UNILINC provide an enabling structure within which these ideas can become reality.
- Collaboration inspires. A UNILINC director who was in charge of a major Australian corporation once told me that cooperation was against human nature, but that was why he liked his involvement with UNILINC and the library world as it helped keep alive the hope that people could work together for the common good.

CL: What have been some of your most satisfying and rewarding involvements in library collaboration?

Wade: Without a doubt the best part of my role has been working closely with some of the wisest and most generous, talented and dedicated people one could ever hope to meet; followed closely by the opportunity to be involved in some very exciting innovation made possible through close collaboration, a critical mass of highly skilled and creative technical people and the shared desire to give it a go.

CL: Libraries have a long and impressive history of working together. Interlibrary cooperation is not the only type of collaboration. What other types of partnerships and networking do you see as important?

Wade: Given my experience with UNILINC, I would have to say the area of shared systems is coming into its own. With the next generation library systems, there will be a high level of skills required to provide necessary local flexibility and functionality and to make the most of what the systems have to offer. At the same time it will be increasingly difficult for individual libraries to resource this need. It will make more sense to work together and share in the resultant solutions. UNILINC and other similar consortia have shown that this can be done and I think there will be greater take up of that model.

CL: Looking toward 2020, what new challenges for libraries do you see on the horizon?   How might libraries partner to meet these challenges?

Wade: Costs everywhere are being scrutinised in a way that has not been contemplated in the past. All organisations are looking at new and cheaper ways of doing things, and as cost centres, libraries are always vulnerable. In corporations, professional work is increasingly being outsourced or services are being delivered electronically. Developments in artificial intelligence, even work requiring interpretation and subtle understanding, may be delivered by avatars or robots by 2020. The more libraries are responsive to the need to demonstrate efficiency, the more likely they are to withstand these challenges, and sharing systems and other infrastructure can deliver these efficiencies.

At the same time costs are being scrutinised, people and organisations want more and better information and they want it immediately. Collaboration has played and will continue to play a key role in this with shared discovery services, raising awareness of new e-resources, negotiating on price and providing a forum to push for improvements in service delivery and licence conditions. In addition, evaluating service delivery -- especially using collaborative benchmarking with other libraries -- will become even more valuable as a strategy for demonstrating value.

As far as UNILINC is concerned the focus for the next six years will be to make the most of every opportunity for collaboration that comes along and create a few new ones along the way.