Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

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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.

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).

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 which supply ample material for many stories and reflections into the future... and which enrich you as a person. It also provides an opportunity to contribute to situations which are often overlooked 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. 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.

[Dr Ian Stoodley's day job is a researcher in the Information Studies Group of QUT, Brisbane. His research interests include the experience of professional ethics, higher education and technology.]