

INTERVIEW

ALYSON DALBY, CO-FOUNDER OF INTERNATIONAL LIBRARIANS NETWORK AND GLOBAL LIBRARIAN

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Is there such a thing as global librarianship? Copenhagen-based Australian librarian Alyson Dalby believes there is, and with the creation of International Librarians Network she is working on bringing librarians of the world together. Why? Because great ideas come to life when different perspectives meet, and libraries and people in libraries stand stronger in advocacy, professional ethics and development of librarianship when they are connected.

“Let me tell you a story about a woman named Jenny. Jenny manages a public library network in a rural area of south-eastern Australia. She has participated in every round of the International Librarians Network (ILN, red.) which means she has been in the program 7 times and connected with 7 different people from around the world. One of Jenny’s partners was Hamid from Afghanistan, who had been recently employed as the new Director of Public Libraries for Afghanistan. What Jenny realized was that Hamid didn’t have a library background, he was a historian, and she found herself giving him lots of technical advice about libraries. Hamid was sharing his plans for building a new National Library of Afghanistan with Jenny, who was sharing it with her staff, and suddenly you get a connection between a rural library in Australia and the upcoming National Library of Afghanistan - a connection that carried benefit to everybody involved. It’s pretty amazing that you can connect the world like that.

The ILN opens our community up to new ideas from people who are in different situations. That could be in a different country or a different kind of job or a different sector. Different people have different perspectives, and sometimes value comes from new ways of looking at your own work. Sometimes value comes when you help someone else, and sometimes that value comes from someone you develop a friendship with – someone who says *hey I know you had that important meeting today, how did it go?* We are giving people a platform to develop that on an international level with a fairly low commitment besides their time. The program is free and open to all in libraries, so we get a really wide range of people”.

The story above comes from Alyson Dalby. The first time my path crossed Alyson’s was in a Twitter

introduction from a common friend: “Christian, meet Alyson. She is a librarian and has just moved to Denmark. You two should drink coffee...” which, of course, we did. A 121-character Twitter introduction which leads to a chat, and later a REYV interview, is a great example of how small the internet has made the world and how easy it has become to connect if you are open to those opportunities. Alyson is on a crusade when it comes to connecting librarians of the world. As one of the founders of ILN she puts lots of her free time and energy into facilitating this global program with the aim of helping librarians develop international networks.

From Sydney to Copenhagen

Alyson moved from Sydney, Australia to Copenhagen in late 2015. She is employed at LEO Pharma as Team Manager for Data Readiness in Regulatory Affairs, managing a team that is analyzing and restructuring regulatory data about a suite of pharmaceutical products recently purchased by LEO Pharma. Alyson has been around the library block: from the History of Medicine Library at Royal Australasian College of Physicians to The Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia, while directing her career towards management by studying for a MBA. Alyson served on the Board of Directors of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), and most recently worked at the University of New South Wales Library in Sydney.

Why does an Australian librarian move to Denmark?

“Denmark is like the Goldilocks country; it’s not too hot, it’s not too cold. It’s so nice with the changing of the season; I was excited when it snowed and now you can feel that things are coming to life again, everything is starting to bloom and I’m looking forward to the summer for the first time in my life – Sydney is just too hot for me. Denmark has a slightly more socialist political system which suits my own values, and Denmark is different to Australia but not so different that we didn’t feel confident we could live here. Copenhagen has a number of large global companies so our chances of getting a job as English speakers were good. And of course the appeal of living so close to the rest of Europe is very high!”

In her work with ILN it doesn’t matter if Alyson is located in Sydney, Copenhagen or Nairobi – the ILN management team operates remotely. Alyson has never met many of the people behind the scenes of the program, and the only fundamental condition for her ILN work is a reliable internet connection and a drive to connect librarians of the world.


 A woman with long dark hair and glasses is shown in profile, looking towards a globe. She is wearing a dark top. The globe is partially visible on the right side of the frame, showing continents in yellow and green and oceans in blue. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

FROM AUSTRALIA TO AFGHANISTAN: THE VALUE OF CONNECTING

Connecting librarians of the world

The ILN is a peer mentoring program which helps librarians around the world build networks and develop an international perspective on the profession. Participants in the program are matched with others outside their country, based on the information they provide to the ILN. Partnerships are made for a fixed term, and during this period the partnerships are supported by regular contact and discussions led by the ILN. The vision is that participants develop a widening network of ongoing, independent professional relationships.

How did the ILN begin?

“It started when my friend and colleague Kate Byrne went to the IFLA conference in Helsinki in

2012. When she returned to Sydney we had this conversation in her kitchen where she talked about how fantastic it was to meet people from around the world and get this global perspective, but how most people can't afford to do this. She had this kernel of an idea about an international mentoring program, which we fleshed out and brought, as one of our crazy ideas, to another library friend Clare McKenzie. The three of us decided this was worth exploring.

What we wanted was not a traditional mentoring program, but more like a peer mentoring program where both participants would share and learn. We really wanted to deconstruct existing ideas around mentoring and use only the bits that are actually effective when it comes to learning from

traditional mentoring; the belief that mentoring must be face-to-face, and that it must be a hierarchical relationship with a mentor and a protégé, is heavy baggage if you're trying to set up a new program. We scoured existing literature around mentoring and found that research did not convincingly demonstrate the need for these elements, that sometimes they actually got in the way of what it's really about: sharing knowledge and ideas. We set up the ILN without this baggage, which makes it sustainable, scalable and able to be run internationally.

Our underlying principle is that everyone has something to teach and something to learn, and this can happen across borders, across sectors, and across career stages. So we can learn from people who are junior to us, we can learn from people in other sectors, and there is probably something that those people can learn from us. We really want to challenge the idea that, for example, people in academic libraries can only learn useful things from other people in academic libraries. We've developed a model to support that principle of open collaboration, and our community has been very receptive to this egalitarian approach."

How do you connect people in the program?

"We use the information provided by applicants to match them with other participants, which forms a partnership. We will look at things like the sector that they work in, their location, career stage, and areas of professional interest. It's important to note that we don't automatically match people who are similar. If you work in an academic library but want to be connected with someone in a public library, we can make that happen. We then take all the data and run a programming script which finds the best combination of matches. It's a bit like a dating site algorithm", Alyson laughs.

To make things happen: three women with an idea and a website

Alyson describes the first round of ILN as pretty hectic; like many start-ups it was characterized by both a great will to make things happen, and doubts about how to carry it through.

"We were aiming to launch the first round in the early part of 2013 and we realized that the BOBCATSSS conference (an annual symposium organized by students of library science) was coming up. We were saying 'wouldn't it be great if we could tap into that event, because there's a whole bunch of new LIS graduates, and they are not from Australia, which would be a great market for us'. We quickly created a free website using WordPress, created the program structure and website content, and then highjacked the BOBCATSSS Twitter hashtag to promote the ILN program. So we got a pretty good start in promoting the program. Then we did planned promotion at the ALIA New Librarians Symposium (NLS), which is a conference in Australia for new librarians, run by new librarians. Kate did a presentation at NLS on creating your own professional community, which served as a formal launch for the ILN concept. We honestly thought that we might be able to convince 20 people to sign up for the first round, and we thought they would all be people we knew from Australia, which would really not help with the goal of international mentoring! We were not a part of an established

professional organization, we were basically just three women with an idea and a website – low cost and low key".

Despite the rather unorganized and low key start, the ILN team were pretty sure they were on to something with the ILN concept: "We ended up getting 92 applications to our pilot round, and we got enough international applicants, so everybody was matched with someone from another country".

In March 2016 the ILN launched the 7th round of the program with 1.162 participants from 95 different countries. By then there had been 4.500 participants in the program, from 133 countries, making it the largest librarian mentoring program in the world.

Moving from fiery souls to a solid organization

As the ILN program grew in popularity Alyson, Clare and Kate realized that they needed help to run the ILN on top of their existing full-time jobs. The organization around ILN needed to be strengthened and consolidated.

"In 2015 we incorporated as a non-profit association in Australia which gave us a legal structure. We now have a board of directors, a financial advisor and a legal advisor – all volunteers, for which we are intensely grateful! Beyond that we have a network of 40 volunteers from about 30 countries. An important part of those are what we call *ambassadors*. I have no idea how librarians in, for example, Poland talk to each other; is it via email lists, Facebook groups or LinkedIn groups etc.? So I don't know how to tell librarians in Poland about the ILN. But Magda Gomulka can do that. Magda is our ILN Ambassador in Poland and is doing an amazing job promoting the program through her professional network. There are about 30 of these ILN Ambassadors around the world, representing the program in their country. We also have volunteers running our social media platforms – we're on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn – because we realized early on that we just couldn't keep up with both running the program and constantly pushing information out through those channels. Our Social Media Coordinators are in Canada and Australia, and it's really cool to run this group of volunteers all over the world. Most of the people behind the scenes we've never meet face to face, and they haven't met each

other, which of course is a shame because it would be really nice, but it's amazing to me that people we've never met believe so strongly in what we are doing that they are willing to volunteer both their time and their professional reputation to help us out."

From local to global librarianship

There's no doubt that the ILN connects librarians of the world, but do we as a profession have a global identity?

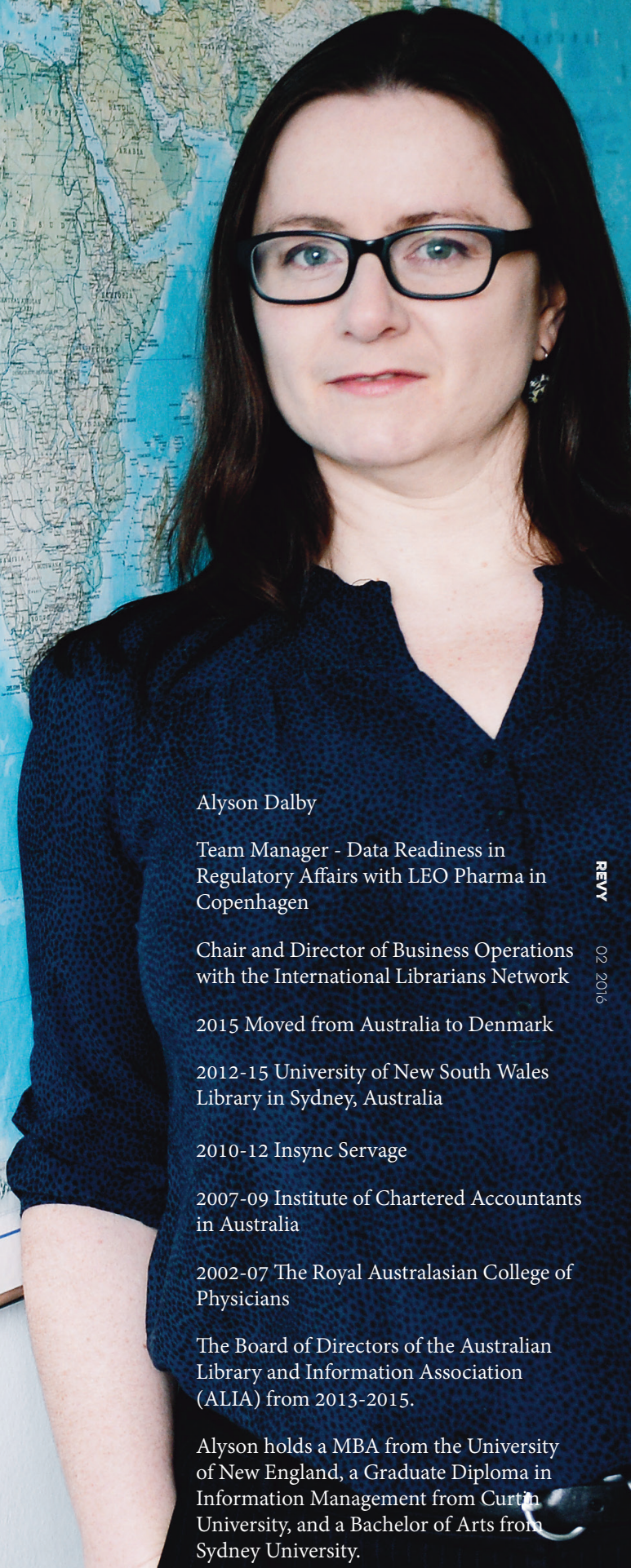
Is there such a thing as Global Librarianship?

"Yes I believe there is. To reference a true global librarian, Jan Holmquist from the Guldborgsund Libraries, global librarianship is about seeing your professional network as a global one, that there are people you can learn from and work with beyond your own country. On top of this there are professional issues about librarianship that are global, such access to information, intellectual property rights, issues in our profession that can't be fought on an individual level but have to be fought on a collective and often international level.

It's a cliché to say that change is happening in and to the profession, but it's also the case that sometimes it feels like it's not happening fast enough, at least in your immediate environment. If you can connect with an international network it can help you realize that if change isn't happening where you are, it could be happening elsewhere, and it also help you get involved and shape the direction of that change, or even lead it locally. Social media has of course created a unique and powerful platform for individuals to easily connect with the rest of the world. But most important is the desire to share and learn with librarians around the world – we are simply trying to make that easier for people".

Applications for the next round of the ILN program will be opening in July 2016. Participation in the program is free, and open to anyone working or studying in the library profession. More information can be found on their website at interlibnet.org.

The impact of ILN was recognised by the American Library Association, which named the program founders as part of their Library Journal Movers and Shakers for 2016 - a special honour, given that only 3% of winners of this award have been from outside the US.



Alyson Dalby

Team Manager - Data Readiness in Regulatory Affairs with LEO Pharma in Copenhagen

Chair and Director of Business Operations with the International Librarians Network

2015 Moved from Australia to Denmark

2012-15 University of New South Wales Library in Sydney, Australia

2010-12 Insync Servage

2007-09 Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia

2002-07 The Royal Australasian College of Physicians

The Board of Directors of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) from 2013-2015.

Alyson holds a MBA from the University of New England, a Graduate Diploma in Information Management from Curtin University, and a Bachelor of Arts from Sydney University.