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A difficult year at work

ALIA members continue to confront a broad range of issues in the workplace. During the past year, many have sought help from the association's industrial services program. Some employment challenges arise from changes which are impacting all parts of Australia's labour market. Others are specific to the library and information sector.

Pay issues have been at the forefront. National wage-fixing processes have undergone quite massive change in the past year or two as decentralisation has taken a firm hold in this country. As a result, a wider range of pay outcomes for librarians is apparent. For our industrial assistance program the task of defining wage levels for particular jobs has become more complex.

ALIA's *Salary scales 1997/98* booklet is now available and makes interesting reading in this regard. It is free to members and can be obtained by telephoning the National Office. Conducted in July and August, this latest survey indicates that salary rates in organisations governed by awards and registered agreements have typically increased by between five and six per cent in the eighteen months since our last review in late 1995. Overall, this compares reasonably with national wage outcomes. In recent times, all-industry average annual wage rises achieved through enterprise agreements have been measured at between four and five per cent.

But average figures mask some marked differences between local outcomes, both for industry as a whole and within the library world specifically. Thus, while the national average wage increase in, for example, public administration this year is 5.5 per cent, pay rises as high as fifteen per cent and as low as one per cent have occurred simultaneously in that sector. Diversity is also apparent in libraries. In higher education, for example, financial constraints have restricted some institutions to increases of no more than two per cent in the past eighteen months. Yet others have been able to boost salaries by four or five times that amount.

Obviously, with enterprise agreements typically covering a two-year period, the timing of their introduction influences variations between outcomes in this type of comparison. In any survey period, one organisation may have recently completed a new agreement, while another may not make the cut-off. This is unavoidable and means care

should be taken to avoid making too much of differences. Nevertheless, a picture of much greater variation between rewards for similar work in different enterprises is an increasingly accurate one. This trend will gather momentum with more decentralisation and further use of individual employment contracts.

Increasing use of casual work can sometimes put downward pressure on wages, especially when proper loadings to compensate for the absence of leave entitlements are not paid. In some cases, the use of employment agencies can have a similar effect, if employers shift the cost of the agent's fee by reducing the hourly rate paid to the librarian. Confusion can often arise as to exactly what conditions have been agreed upon, and who the parties to the arrangement actually are.

But many of these problems can be minimised if contracts are properly defined and formalised. The careful drafting of employment contracts — important already — will be vital as formal awards and agreements become less dominant in Australia's new industrial relations climate. Both employers and individuals will need to understand fully the legal and practical requirements for effective employment contracts if they are to deal successfully with this emerging reality.

To help them do so, ALIA's booklet *Employment contracts for library workers: a guide to formalising rights and responsibilities at work* is now available from the ALIA National Office. It contains explanation of the legal principles underpinning job contracts, sets out the express and implied obligations of both workers and employers and suggests what should be included to avoid confusion about the basis for employment. Given that lack of certainty is sufficient in itself to render an employment contract null and void, it is critical that parties are quite clear about precisely what arrangements they are entering into.

As relationships at work become more individualised, ALIA members — whether as managers or employees — may feel greater need for advice and guidance about changing labour laws, policies and practices. ALIA's industrial service exists to meet precisely that need. Our leaflet *Problems at work: How ALIA can help you*, describes the services which are available free to all members. It too can be obtained by calling ALIA National Office, and will be available on ALIANet shortly. ■

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