Indexing in Australia and New Zealand

There are 200 members of the Drain Exploring Society in New South Wales (the most populous state in Australia). This figure struck me because of the strange nature of the activity – the society is for people who like to explore drains and tunnels underground – and because it is about the same as the number of members of the Australian Society of Indexers (AusSI) in the whole of Australia and New Zealand. A similar number of people in one state want to explore drains as in two countries want to index!

This strange statistic reflects something I like about indexing as a profession – it is a small, select group, and it is possible to get involved as an individual and make a difference. In Australia, if you are active in branch or national committees, and go to the conferences, you soon get to know a very high proportion of indexers in the Society, and presumably in Australia (although we have little idea how many indexers there are here who are not members of AusSI).

Indexers in Australia are concentrated in the cities (as is our population, despite the outback images). AusSI started in Melbourne in 1976, and branches started in NSW in 1989 and the ACT region in 1993. Most members are freelance book indexers, but there are also many database indexers and some in-house indexers working for law publishing companies. The type of work done varies somewhat with place, with more database and annual report indexing in the ACT region (which contains the country’s capital, Canberra) and perhaps more scientific indexing in Victoria, due to the presence there of information sections of the CSIRO research organization.

South Australia and Queensland both have groups (which are smaller than branches), and Western Australia has a contact person. Despite the small number of members outside the major centres, there is still a lot of interest in indexing, as shown by the number of people attending courses run in Alice Springs (Northern Territory), Western Australia and Queensland. Many are librarians who do indexing as part of their work. AusSI also includes a small number of members from New Zealand who work freelance, in-house for publishers, and in libraries.

AusSI has an important role in training new indexers. It regularly runs short courses in Sydney and Melbourne, and other courses according to need throughout Australia. These courses have included book indexing (including indexing software), image indexing, database indexing, thesaurus construction and web indexing (with HTML Indexer). Library schools also teach indexing, often as an elective subject. Some Australian indexers were taught in-house in libraries and publishing companies; others are self-taught. Some indexers have taught for AusSI and through the universities, and I am sure a high proportion of Australian indexers would name Max McMaster, Alan Walker, Michael Wyatt and Garry Cousins as teachers.

AusSI members can submit book indexes for assessment: if they pass they become registered indexers and are identified as such in the list Indexers Available on our website. The National Committee is currently discussing procedures for extending the registration system to database indexers.

This issue of The Indexer was guest-edited by Alan Walker and Glenda Browne on behalf of the Australian Society of Indexers. It has an Asia–Pacific focus, with a paper from China as well as four from Australia, in addition to contributions from the UK. It is with great pleasure that we present our regional contribution to our international indexing journal.

Glenda Browne, Guest Editor