

**Diving into Paradise . . .
volunteering as a librarian in Vanuatu**

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ABSTRACT

This paper will describe my experience of working as a volunteer librarian in Vanuatu. It will discuss the role of librarians in developing countries and the current state of libraries in Vanuatu. The paper is aimed at young professionals in the information field and has also been written to encourage others to 'step outside the square', take responsibility for their careers and consider working in a global environment. Information professionals in the 21st century should be committed to improving access to information and, in doing so, peoples' quality of life.

In March 2004 I began work as a volunteer librarian at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT). VIT is located in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Similar to a TAFE and vocational education institution in Australia, VIT trains young ni-Vanuatu¹ people in trades such as electricity, tourism, hospitality, automotive, building construction, carpentry, business, accounting and secretarial studies.

The Vanuatu Institute of Technology is a dual language vocational education school. There are approximately 500 students and 50 teachers. Each subject is taught in two streams, students and teachers are either English speaking – Anglophone, or French speaking - Francophone. Everyone speaks Bislama, (a form of pidgin) as well as their own local language. Vanuatu claims the greatest number of different languages per head of population of any country in the world.²

¹ The indigenous people of Vanuatu.

² Bennett, Michelle and Harewood, Jocelyn. (2003). Vanuatu – Lonely Planet. Melbourne, Vic: Lonely Planet Publications, p.27.

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I have worked in various libraries for the past seven years in Melbourne, Canberra and Western Australia. My first job was in a school library, however for the past four years I have worked at the National Library of Australia in Kinetica and Reader Services. In March 2004 I began working as an Australian Youth Ambassador³ at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology. The Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development Program places skilled young Australian volunteers, aged 18 – 30, on short-term assignments in developing countries throughout Asia and the Pacific.

I chose to gain further experience and strengthen my knowledge of the profession by working in a developing country. I wanted to work in a library in a different country and help other people who had not had the same access to education, information and knowledge that I was privileged to experience.

When I arrived, the VIT library was staffed by one untrained person – my colleague Gina. Gina was also the 'school photocopier' and, because resources are rare in Vanuatu, approximately 90% of her time was taken up by photocopying. The library was located in a small room with about 7000 books. Because of the dual-language system within VIT, many of the books were in French as well as English. The books were in no particular order and many remain unpacked, sitting in boxes amongst the shelves. The library has never had a budget and, in the past, relied solely on donations. Many of the books are old and irrelevant to the subjects taught at VIT. The library included two computers, one Anglophone and one Francophone. There was no Internet and only 10% of the books were entered on an antiquated French database. Students used the library for private study and teachers used the library for photocopying. The VIT Women's group holds meetings and workshops in the library and student Christian groups hold lunchtime prayer meetings. Very few of the books were borrowed and students rarely came to the librarian to ask for help.

³ For more information about the Australian Youth Ambassador for Development Program see <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/youtham/default.cfm>

My job description included assisting the librarian with her studies in librarianship, planning for a move to a new library, identifying and selecting new resources, identifying, selecting and implementing a catalogue system, promoting the library within VIT, and working with other community librarians to enhance their skills.

An AusAID strengthening project was based within the school, which involved the building of a new library and also provided some money to help achieve my objectives. I used the money to:

- employ an assistant to relieve the librarian from her photocopying duties which allowed me to spend time teaching her library skills;
- purchase a library catalogue with both a French and English interface;
- purchase new books and resources;
- purchase library stationery;
- purchase 8 new computers, a server, printers and scanners; and
- purchase wood and materials to build furniture for the new library.

Other achievements I made in the library included:

- sorting the entire collection into Dewey⁴;
- training the librarian and assistant in library tasks and organisation skills;
- contributing to a new understanding of how a library can benefit VIT students and teachers;
- working with librarians in Vanuatu from different islands, and transferring my knowledge and skills relating to libraries.

My role as a volunteer librarian included sorting and organising resources, library management, training, logistics planning, communicating with other staff and businesses such as suppliers, builders and architects, acquiring books and resources without the Internet, installing an ILMS and budgeting.

⁴ I was not allowed to weed out any of the less useful items in the VIT library. VIT comes under a special Act and one of the requirements of the Act is that any resources that are donated are never allowed to be disposed of. This means that there are rooms full of old, broken and unused furniture and boxes of books that are irrelevant to the curriculum, but still have to be 'stored' by the library.

Some of the more interesting and exciting parts of my role included learning how to read architectural designs, working on the layout and style of furniture with carpentry teachers, and running workshops both in Vila and on Pentecost – a remote island, for librarians who have never received any formal library training.

Vanuatu

Vanuatu is located in the South Pacific and is made up of over 83 islands. From 1906 until 1980, Vanuatu operated under an Anglo-French Condominium. There were two police forces, two post offices, two health services, two education systems, two currencies and two prison systems. The Republic of Vanuatu achieved independence in 1980.

Vanuatu is classed as a developing country, heavily influenced by external events including commodity prices, foreign aid inflows, tourist arrivals and natural disasters such as cyclones, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Vanuatu remains a high-cost economy with limited growth of business and industries due to a small market. Around 80% of the population live and work in rural areas with poorly developed infrastructure and very basic services.⁵ Access to education and health services is relatively low, the illiteracy rate high and there is significant evidence of gender inequality. Many women miss out on education and are unable to read, limiting their ability to participate in decision-making processes. Vanuatu also has a major problem in providing employment for its rapidly growing youth population.⁶ Political instability, frequent changes in policy and public sector personnel and a lack of long-term economic strategy continues to impede progress.

⁵ Bennett, Michelle and Harewood, Jocelyn. (2003). Vanuatu – Lonely Planet. Melbourne, Vic: Lonely Planet Publications, p.21.

⁶ “In 2002 it was estimated that around 50% of the population was aged under 15 years, while only 2% was over 60”. Bennett, Michelle and Harewood, Jocelyn. (2003). Vanuatu – Lonely Planet. Melbourne, Vic: Lonely Planet Publications, p.21.

Under 70% of Ni-Vanuatu children complete primary education. Many do not continue their schooling because of the high cost of school fees and/or because they fail the grade 6 exam.⁷

Libraries in Developing Countries

I recently conducted a full-day workshop for librarians on the main island of Efate. Throughout the day, which included ni-Vanuatu presentations and small group work, I came to realise that only three of the members knew how to catalogue properly using Dewey. Only four of the libraries represented had access to the Internet and the majority of the librarians had completed little or no study in librarianship. However, the librarians were extremely keen to learn and it was encouraging that at the end of the day, participants asked the Vanuatu Librarians' Association committee to offer more workshops and training sessions. It can be overwhelming at times to think how far the libraries in Vanuatu must come before they are at an international standard of information management, however it is encouraging and inspiring to see that one simple workshop has sparked new energy and enthusiasm for the profession. Although it is sometimes difficult, it is important that new librarians take action and responsibility for change and improvements within our profession.

Libraries in developing countries face issues such as lack of funding, resources and infrastructure; lack of skilled professionals⁸ to operate and manage libraries; difficulties in accessing appropriate and relevant information resources, the availability but slow uptake of modern technologies due to lack of skill and cost; low literacy levels making printed information inaccessible to many people; difficulties in acquiring relevant and up-to-date locally produced resources; financial constraints; macro-environmental effects such as politics and the environment and a general lack of management, strategic direction and coordination.

⁷ Vanuatu Department of Education, 2004.

⁸ To study basic librarianship at the University of the South Pacific it costs around \$350 per subject. The average wage of a librarian in Vanuatu is \$80 per week.

Issues faced by libraries in Vanuatu

Many of the issues mentioned above are impeding the progress of libraries in Vanuatu. The physical environment and distribution of islands and people in Vanuatu means that they face special challenges and need different solutions from other developing countries with large populations. Most libraries in Vanuatu are on Efate, the main island; however 80% of the population live on other islands. People living on the outer islands have limited access to the latest information, only adding to the difficulties of progress in Vanuatu. Libraries on the islands are generally connected to schools. Some of my colleagues are working as volunteers and currently building libraries and encouraging communities to take up initiatives to raise money for ongoing budgets to purchase books. Kirk Goodman, on the island of Ambae, is an American Peace Corps volunteer. He has been planting fields of watermelons from seed with other members of the community which will be brought down to Port Vila on a ship at Christmas time to sell and raise money to buy books for their library.

Vanuatu does not currently have a National Bibliographic Database and there is no resource sharing through interlibrary loans. Many of the libraries do not have access to the Internet and are completing time-consuming original cataloguing. Many of the 83 islands do not have telephone connections and/or electricity. The majority of libraries in Vanuatu have little or no budget and rely solely on aid donations that are often irrelevant and out of date. Due to lack of funds, many libraries in Vanuatu are using free library software with limited features. Because the majority of librarians are untrained, the standard of librarianship is relatively low. The quality of cataloguing is poor and the lack of an understanding of the role of the librarian is restricting the progress of libraries in Vanuatu. Many Government institutions and schools do not see the role of a librarian as important and have limited budgets to fund salaries. Librarians are poorly paid and there is little incentive to improve their skills or libraries. A library in Vanuatu often means a locked room full of books and documents but no librarian.

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Improving libraries in Vanuatu

Developing countries not only need donations of books, but trained librarians who can transfer skills and operate libraries with professional knowledge and practicality. Working in libraries in developing countries requires knowledge of the basic skills of librarianship such as organising information, educating people in how to use the information, developing circulation systems, storage and conservation. Libraries in Vanuatu and other developing countries continue to need book donations, however donors should ensure that the resources are relevant to the library in which they are donated. If possible, libraries in developing countries should try to communicate with donors prior to accepting donations to ensure that the donated books are relevant and useful.

Libraries in developing countries need money to purchase and collect resources with local content. Although many libraries rely on book donations and aid money to purchase books, it is heartening to see that some communities are now learning to be self-sufficient and raise money for buying new books through income generating projects such as the 'watermelon for books' project on Ambae.

Access to the Internet will aid the development of libraries in Vanuatu, however the physical distance between islands and lack of telecommunication networks needs to be overcome. The government of Vanuatu and aid organisations must see the development of telecommunications as a priority and invest and support Internet connections to the more remote islands. With an improved telecommunications network, the development of a union catalogue and resource sharing is attainable.

Due to the high cost of formal library studies at universities, the Vanuatu Librarians' Association is considering delivering short workshops to improve the knowledge and skills of librarians in Vanuatu. This will help raise the standard of cataloguing and library practices within Vanuatu. The Association should also take the lead in raising the profile of librarians and

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promote them as enablers and facilitators of information rather than gatekeepers. As the government is currently working to improve library standards amongst students, they must also ensure that libraries are supported and information literacy programs need to be seen as a core component in the improvement of literary standards in Vanuatu. It is the role of the Association to lobby the government and raise the award wage of librarians.

Personal challenges faced when working in a library in a developing country

Throughout the year I feel as though I have been more professionally and personally challenged than ever before in my life. I have found the work I have done to be rewarding. For example, my main counterpart is Francophone and my French is at a basic level. I communicate with her in Bislama and am now confident in teaching others in Bislama. It was a challenge to work across the full range of librarianship duties, as in the past I have mainly concentrated on reference, education, systems and promotion within the library field. However, it was also refreshing to realise that I have other skills, and when challenged I am able to learn quickly and work in new areas.

One of the biggest challenges for me was to realise that there are other ways of working. The pace of life in Vanuatu is sometimes viewed as slow and relaxed, which can be true. Life in Vanuatu is not simply about work. For ni-Vanuatu people, caring for family, friends and communities as well as a relaxed lifestyle is very important. Work is often a 'means to an end' and not the main part of their life. Although incredibly frustrating at times, it taught me perspective and that work is not everything. The Western way of living in a consumerist and individualistic society that is often self interested and lonely. I believe it is important that we never lose the Australian ability to laugh at ourselves and our mistakes, and above all never become too self-important.

Taking responsibility for your career

The role and work of a librarian is defined by one person – YOU! It is time for new librarians to fully experience the library profession and contribute to the future of libraries. Whether working in Australia or overseas it is important to be creative and culturally aware. Remember and respect that people are from different backgrounds and are at different stages of their lives. Each one of us has been shaped by the environment, our culture and personal experiences. Whether working in Australia or overseas, it is helpful to be humble and try to understand the 'culture' in which we work. Learn about the people in your workplace and work together to develop creative solutions.

To work in any type of library in the 21st Century, and to sustain the advances made by others, it is essential that librarians seriously consider the types of skills that are needed. Librarians must be committed, motivated and passionate about what they do. They need to be knowledgeable and flexible, and particularly good at communication, negotiation and advocacy skills. It is important that librarians involve others and share successes as well as learn from failures. Librarians need to respond to and support diverse human needs for information.

I believe it is both beneficial and healthy to work in different types of libraries and gain experience from a variety of librarians. In the 21st Century, it is rare for any professional to stay in the same section, job or career for more than a few years, and librarianship is no different. Professionals are more and more used to change and many now embrace it as a 'way of life'. It is essential that librarians prepare themselves for opportunities by gaining skills and experience from different library sectors. Thankfully librarians work in a profession that offers a broad range of skills associated with organising and delivering information. The opportunities for employment are therefore endless. Librarians can work in almost any type of library in the global environment. Whether it be traditional-style library work such as in a law library in Michigan, a government department library in New Zealand, or a community library in Far North Queensland or in one

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of the new areas of the profession such as an indexer for Google, a document controller for maps or a database developer in China, information professionals are able to use, and build upon, the same core set of skills.

I encourage new librarians to take the time and responsibility for their own professional development. Aim high when thinking about what you would like to achieve in your professional life. Tell others about your ideas and ask them to advise and support you - no one ever achieves everything on their own, and professional isolation only leads to a lack of motivation. Surround yourself with motivated, positive people and watch how others work, talk to people you admire about their own experiences and learn from them.

Working in a developing country with very few skilled librarians to share ideas with has been challenging. It has helped me to remain motivated and inspired during the more difficult times by talking to librarians who have also worked in developing countries as well as family and friends. It's easy to be cynical about professional organisations, but I encourage new librarians to start changing them by contributing. Attend conferences, apply for scholarships, take opportunities when they arise and try working in different libraries when you are new to the profession in order to gain experience and knowledge.

I encourage new librarians to use their knowledge and technology to work smarter, delegate, encouraging flexible working arrangements and learn more to keep at the forefront of our profession. Be confident in your skills and knowledge. Although new to the profession you have many skills that are relevant and useful; and often refreshing to those who have been in the profession for much longer. Have a go and try, even if you are not sure if you can do something. It is often the people who choose to 'step outside the square' who become leaders and innovators in the field. Through working overseas you can learn more about the profession and improve your skills whilst gaining experience in a variety of libraries.

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The range of libraries in which new professionals can now work is endless. I encourage you to consider the work you are doing and continuously ask yourself if you are achieving your fundamental goals. Reflect and consider areas of work that you may like to experience. Remember that to achieve things, we must dream as well as act.

Australian libraries – working in a global environment

For Australia to remain at the forefront of the library profession I encourage you to learn and gain experience from libraries in other countries. The perception we have of Australian libraries can only be enhanced through working in other countries. Through working in a global environment individuals will gain inspiration and ideas of new initiatives and other ways of working and solving problems. Through meeting other librarians in different contexts and countries you can develop a greater empathy and understanding of the role of librarians and libraries. It is important that Australian librarians do not just 'read' about new developments in other countries but actively participate in the change. There are numerous exciting professional opportunities for librarians in Australia and, because of this, no real threat of a 'brain drain'. However it is important that Australians remain at the forefront of the profession and gain practical knowledge of initiatives and directions of other libraries throughout the world.

As newly educated professionals in the Australian library field, we are fortunate to have choice. If you are not passionate about your work, change it! Ensure that you have times for reflection and listen to your heart. Our work is a small component of who we really are and I encourage you to ensure that it is balanced with other areas of your life.

Working in a developing country has given me confidence and knowledge about people that I had only previously read about. There are many people in the world who are much less fortunate than us – in Vanuatu many students do not continue education past grade 6, people continue to use subsistence farming methods and live without electricity. Working in a

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developing country is not just about transferring skills. I have learned a great deal about the Ni-Vanuatu culture and way of life and have been exposed to opportunities and experiences that I would never have got in Australia. I am now fluent in another language and have been fortunate to develop friendships that will last a lifetime. I was also able to transfer other relevant skills outside of the library field such as teaching cooking, computer programs, English and how to drive a car!

Conclusion

Although it is unlikely that political stability and transparency in Vanuatu will be achieved in the short to medium term, the development of information centres is an important step towards the formation of long-term sustainable development strategies of the country. The role of the VIT library continues to develop and is not merely a resource centre for books. Libraries in all countries continue to be a place of refuge, counselling and retreat. They offer peace and quiet, space and comfort amidst the business of life.

As well as offering access to information at break-neck speed, we should not forget the very important social and communal role of libraries. Libraries continue to aid development in all countries. They can improve people's quality of life. Well-informed citizens can play an active role in society and exercise democratic rights making the necessary decisions to govern themselves. Effective and timely use of relevant information can contribute to development efforts such as reducing poverty, increasing productivity, improving governance and natural resource management and increasing effective participation. Although there is still a long way to go, I am proud to say that at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology, staff and students are now learning to use information to improve their lives and futures, and there are delightful moments where I see glimpses of a new love of lifelong learning emerging.

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