

From rainy Melbourne, over dry Loxton, to sunny Rijeka: the mysterious ways of the ALIA mentorship program

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The ALIA Mentoring Scheme is a 12-month formal arrangement that offers opportunities for early and mid-career ALIA members to connect with experienced LIS professionals, who are matched to each individual. Running from July to June, formal sessions from the ALIA education team are punctuated by partnership meetings, where personal goals and career development can be discussed. The scheme supports reflective practice and encourages recording progress as part of CPD.

The experiences of one such partnership are shared.

The mentor: Tanja

In June 2021, I had already heard about the ALIA mentorship program, but I got curious about it after chatting with one of my work colleagues at the time who had sincerely enjoyed her monthly chats with her mentor located in WA. So, I decided to give it a go. It was an extra thing for my never-ending to-do list when I was already crazy busy with my demanding job as a manager at Monash Health, Victoria, but my desire to guide new librarians through what is sometimes a very messy jungle called librarianship - especially during the pandemic - was enough for me to apply for this mentor role.

Soon after that I got an email from my mentee - an accomplished pharmacist and librarianship student based in rural SA. I think we were only nervous for one minute when we met on Zoom for the first time. After meeting each other's fur babies, we started our conversation in quite a structural way. From the first meeting I was so impressed with Emma's amazing organisational skills, as she had her list of questions ready for us to discuss during our meeting. To help me to prepare, Emma kindly emailed her questions to me beforehand.

Last year and the year before were certainly not like any of us imagined they would be. In addition to all the discomfort of the pandemic, I resigned from my dream job. Things that we do! Despite my not being employed, I neither gave up my ALIA membership, nor my monthly responsibilities towards Emma. I did not want it to end - there was still (librarian) breath left in me!

Together with my family, I started to work on my/our other dream - to move to Croatia. It has been a dream for many years, and we felt ready like never before. So, we left Australia in early March. Croatia welcomed us with open arms, beautiful food, amazing history, and my greatest love - the Adriatic Sea - but also with oh-so-not-like-Aussie kind smooth bureaucracy. Surprisingly it took me only two days to get my Australian qualifications recognised (hooray for ALIA approved courses) however, I must pass an exam on the Croatian jurisdiction which I am preparing for at the moment.

Croatian libraries and librarians are just amazing. I have met several librarians already and the Croatian Library Association invited me to present on several projects I have worked on in the last couple of years.

As I am learning how to find my feet in a new country, Emma is facing similar challenges in a little town where she studies online and works hard in irregular shifts as a pharmacist. But we never missed a single meeting! We are following our ALIA monthly mentorship agenda but as we now know each other much better now we also talk about other things we learned since our last catch up. The beauty of this program is that we both are constantly learning from each other.

In the meantime, Emma received a letter of commendation for her studies in 2021 and she has begun reaching out to others in her state. She hopes to work with SA Health librarians later this year (which I advised her to contact for volunteering opportunities). Even writing this article was something we both agreed on as we both believe that mentorship is such a rewarding experience and opportunity to support fellow librarians at any stage of their careers.

As a mentor, it gave me so much pleasure to teach a future librarian to expand her horizons, recognise potential she can already utilise in the profession, and how to do things certain ways that might only be thought of after gaining some work experience. I am so grateful for having Emma as my mentee. She and other students like Emma deserve an ongoing support from their future work colleagues to build networks before stepping into the workforce. We did plan to catch up in either Adelaide or Melbourne. But since I moved to another country, I would be very happy to host Emma in Croatia and show her local libraries of course!

The mentee: Emma

My career in librarianship commenced in 2020 when I began my studies in the Graduate Diploma program at UniSA. As I am a pharmacist, I knew the value of belonging to a professional body and so, after I had dipped my toes in, I joined ALIA in January 2021. The Mentoring Scheme immediately appealed to me as a means to

connect with someone in the industry and ease my transition from pharmacist to librarian.

I could not believe how lucky I was to be paired with Tanja! Upon receiving her details, I felt like an imposter until about five minutes into our first meeting. Her enthusiasm in supporting students and new graduates was welcoming. Her support through the Mentoring Scheme helped me home in on the skills necessary for health librarianship.

It was clear that Tanja was someone who was good at pivoting and leading her team through the challenges of COVID-19. Although she was incredibly busy, she forged opportunities for me to attend training sessions delivered by her team and encouraged me to join as many groups as I could. Despite the disruption from extended lockdowns, particularly in Victoria, she always made time for our monthly catchups. I could see Tanja's leadership skills in action as she outlined the way in which she encouraged her team, as well as me, to remain positive and adaptable through difficult times.

Living, working, and studying outside of a major city can be an isolating experience. Despite university being optimised for and delivered well online, I have still felt at times that I am millions of miles away from being a librarian. Tanja has really made a difference in grounding me and keeping me feel connected to the profession. I think this underpins the program, as I feel sure that Tanja will be someone I speak to regularly throughout my career.

The theme of reinvention has been strong throughout our partnership. Tanja's move to Rijeka and into a Croatian library is a foreshadowing of my own move to Adelaide and (hopefully) into libraries in 2023. I just hope my two rescued greyhounds take to their new lives as well as Tanja's cat has to hers! I am excited to take the skills I have developed over the last 10 years in pharmacy and tailor them to the information management environment.

The Scheme and Tanja have gently pushed me out of my comfort zone with good result. As a self-described nerdy introvert, networking has not been a strength of mine. I have, however, reached out to a couple of institutions about volunteering. I hope to volunteer with the SA Health Library Service later this year.

Through prioritising and commitment to the agreement, we have made this experience work. My current job's roster has been severely impacted by COVID-19. This, coupled with my study load and Tanja's workload, meant that there was a huge requirement for flexibility in our partnership. I think we have done extremely well in navigating this and the multiple time zones when scheduling our meetings.

It would have been easy for Tanja and I to lose touch following her move to Croatia in March 2022. However, I am absolutely thrilled that we are still catching up and know that one day the stars will align, and we will meet in person. Until then, I hope I can jump headfirst into librarianship and repay the favor by helping those who come after me.

Post Script

Rijeka (in Italian Fiume) is a cultural, educational and scientific centre in Croatia and home to a unique mix of grand architecture, beautiful beaches, excellent Mediterranean food, a rich music scene and one of the most vibrant carnivals in Europe. Rijeka is the first Croatian city to hold the European Capital of Culture title, after competing against Dubrovnik and Zagreb. Rijeka is proud with its established collaboration between local businesses, multicultural community groups and reputable educational institutions in supporting societal and economic transformations of the city. Both The University Library and The City Library play a central role in supporting those initiatives by promoting digital literacy, entrepreneurship, start-up culture and the preservation of local heritage.

The world's leading collection of the Glagolitic alphabet is displayed at the University Library Rijeka with 127 exhibits that tell the story of the importance of this alphabet in European cultural history. The alphabet was born in the 9th century and then grew into the Croatian national alphabet. Locals from Rijeka are very excited about the new state of the art building for The Rijeka City Library which is going to be the largest library in the Balkan region.



Greetings from Rijeka, Croatia: European Capital of Culture 2020