

Paper given at the 'Partnerships in Knowledge' Conference, Canberra, 20-23 April 2001 hosted by AusSI ACT Branch and the Canberra Society of Editors. Published in *Australian Society of Indexers Newsletter* 2001, vol. 25, no. 9/10, p. 92-3.

## **Registration of database indexers**

**Sandra Henderson**

During this conference I've heard some interesting comments to do with registration.

During John Simkin's session on Friday afternoon someone asked 'Has the quality of book indexing improved in Australia since registration of back-of-book indexers has been around?' In the same session Alan Walker noted that in the US there are significant numbers of indexers who wouldn't touch registration with a barge-pole. I've heard several editors express a view that development of a system of accreditation of editors is a path they must go down. Last night Max McMaster said, in accepting his Medal, that there are a number of very competent indexers who are not members of the Society (and who by implication are therefore not eligible to be considered for the medal). Equally, I know of competent database indexers who are not members of the Society. Perhaps the lack of a registration process is one reason these people have for not joining—one of the things they can point to as a failing of the Society when they think 'What's in it for me?'

### **What is registration?**

So what is it we are trying to achieve and why?

What's registration and what are the benefits? Why do the database indexers want to belong to this secret sub-society of 'registered indexers'? (The issue of web-indexer registration is no doubt just around the corner.) If an indexer is working as a freelance or in-house database indexer, meeting the requirements of their employer in terms of speed, quality and consistency, what does registration offer? Registration in a professional sense can be defined as 'an impartial, third party endorsement of your knowledge and expertise by a respected professional body' (from the South African Board of Personnel Practice). Many other definitions mention the words 'assuring competence'. Being a registered indexer is not necessarily a guarantee for clients that all your indexing is of an excellent standard, but it should guarantee them that your indexing is of an acceptable standard and that you know what you are doing.

Registration is often linked to professionalism. In many jurisdictions it is illegal to practice as a doctor, lawyer, dentist, engineer and so on, if your name does not appear on a state or country register of like professionals, and the registration process is tied up with completion of completion of recognised educational courses, some amount of professional experience, participation in ongoing continuing education, and acceptance of a professional code of conduct or code of ethics. Linked to this is a process by which registration may be withdrawn for unethical or incompetent practice. However, there are also a range of occupations where registration is not mandatory, and some, like indexing, where even the basic educational achievement is not mandated. We are not the only occupation struggling with the issue of registration and how to achieve it. The peak bodies in those occupations wonder if they are indeed a profession, and see a registration process as a step in the direction of recognition as a profession.

Registration may be seen as a process which raises the status of the profession by assuring the client community about qualifications, standards and quality of practice. It is a step towards maintaining and gradually improving standards of practice, and it is to be hoped that the history of registration of book indexers has gradually improved the overall standard of book indexing in this country.

## **What happens in other societies?**

In the UK there is a system of accreditation and registration of back-of-book indexers, with education criteria specified for the accreditation level, and registration as the higher level achievement. There is no accreditation of registration of database indexers, or web indexers—indeed these newer mutant varieties don't seem to be much in evidence in their society.

In the United States, as has been mentioned earlier in the conference, there is no system of accreditation or registration of indexers. As has also been said before at the conference, there is much opposition to the idea of any regulation. However, the issue is not dead, it is raised at the conferences of the American Society of Indexers, and Kate Mertes is writing a paper on the issue for their conference next month (May 2001). She does not sound overly optimistic that anything will be achieved, but supporters of the concept do not want to let it die. The Canadians, similarly, have no system of registration.

## **Progress**

For over twenty years AusSI has been registering back-of-book indexers. In fact the Society's constitution says that a register of indexers will be kept. It is the practice of the Society to recommend only those indexers who are registered. The lack of a process for the registration of database indexers thus places the Society in itself in an awkward position. There are no indexers registered as database indexers (although some registered back-of-book indexers such as Max are equally capable in the field of database indexing). So how can the Society recommend an indexer to an organisation seeking a database indexer (and the clients are generally organisations, not publishers as is the case with back-of-book indexers). Indexers available is made online from the Society's web pages—and database indexers are listed—and people seeking a database indexer do use it as a means of locating possible indexers. If someone is contracted to do indexing because they are listed, and their work is not competent, this reflects badly on the Society despite any declarations that the listing does not imply recommendation for unregistered indexers. Those of us who've been to Marysville, Robertson and Katoomba know that the issue of registration of database indexers has been raised at each of those conferences, at least in informal discussion sessions, with everyone going away muttering that it's all too hard. However, after the most recent Hobart conference where it was discussed yet again, a small working group was convened (electronically) to work on developing a proposal. There were a succession of ideas and refinements passed around by email between the working group members (Garry, Max, Margaret and myself). We're now at the stage of having a proposal which needs the comments of the wider database indexing membership before we proceed any further.

## **What is being proposed?**

The document as it stands starts with a statement of the purpose of registration. These are:

- To assist employers select suitable indexers for database work through a recognised accreditation process
- To provide a benchmark for database indexers to evaluate their own indexing skills and competencies
- To provide a measure of competence for the Society in recommending database indexers.

The more difficult issue, that of the criteria for assessment, has been the subject of much consideration, and will no doubt provoke much debate. The criteria suggested are:

- Education/training course attendance, e.g. appropriate indexing component in an information management course; specialised training in an AusSI database indexing/abstracting course

- Considerable experience in database indexing/abstracting of text/image material. This requires the use of both subject analysis as well as subject indexing. Subject cataloguing alone is not sufficient
- Assessment on sample. This would involve both: subject analysis and assignment of keywords using both thesaurus and non-thesaurus tools; and abstracting

It is suggested that the sample be two batches of ten records, one batch to be indexed using a general thesaurus (such as APAIS) and the other to be indexed using a specialist thesaurus. The applicant would have a choice of specialist thesaurus out of a limited group of options.

NOT ALL OF THE ABOVE CRITERIA WOULD NEED TO BE MET. A very experienced indexer may be exempted from one of the above.

Verification of education/training course attendance and/or database indexing experience would have to be provided, from educational and/or employer institutions.

There are, not unexpectedly, some problems with the criteria. The national committee of AusSI is concerned to keep some degree of parity with the registration for book indexing, and at present registration of book indexers is on a single criterion, although it has recently been expanded somewhat. However, the basis of registration is still the examination of a completed index, and there is no requirement for educational qualifications or substantiation of significant experience.

There is no standard curriculum in educational institutions, and the indexing component of information management courses can vary from brief mentions to intensive practical work. The Society has no role in the accreditation of any courses in database indexing, so is it legitimate to base registration on attendance at a course. It is also the case that at least in the past, many database indexers were subjected to very informal in-house training, based on a single database, by people who had also received no formal training.

There are quite a few more-than-competent database indexers who've spent their whole career indexing for a single database, or working in a very specialised area. Is sample indexing using a generalist thesaurus a useful measure of their indexing skill in this case? Some indexers have worked for years with a database or databases which do not require abstracts—should they be disadvantaged by this?

There is also a proposal for continued professional development and re-registration after ten years. There are no such requirements for book indexers. Whatever the merits of a re-registration process for either book or database indexers, would the Society's limited number of assessors be able to cope with this? The reaction of the national committee was that trying to achieve this for book indexers would be impossible given the limited resources available in terms of assessors. What of the opportunities for continued professional development? This is much easier for an indexer in a large government organisation where training and development are valued and funded, less easy for those in other organisations or freelancing. The nature of some database indexing is also very specialised, limiting the value of many development opportunities.

It is proposed that a panel of three assessors carry out the process. How are these people to be chosen in the first instance? Who assesses the assessors? While there are quite a number of experienced database indexers in Canberra and Melbourne, the same is not true for Sydney or other centres. Does this matter? Would the panel of assessors have to be physically present to administer a sample indexing process, or could this aspect be looked after by a single assessor?

As I thought about this I also wondered about some of the closely related activities undertaken by database indexers. These will include database management without actual indexing, a process of maintaining the database over time at a high level of consistency—not measured by the proposed criteria but a skill most experienced database indexer would be

expected to have. The development and maintenance of thesauri and authority control is also a key component and almost inseparable from the main work of an indexer or database manager. Even those using a thesaurus maintained elsewhere frequently undertake variant forms of thesaurus work—maintaining authority lists of terms used to enhance the thesaurus at a local level or to populate the other fields of a database. Should there be some recognition of this part of a database indexer's work?

As you can see this is not a cut-and-dried subject. What the Database Indexers Registration working group has done is think about the most pressing issues, put forward a proposal, and your comments are welcomed.