

SUMMARY FOR THE LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SECTOR

ALIA House, Canberra 12 May: Media commentators described tonight's Federal Budget as 'boring' compared with the previous year's highly contentious measures, but there were still items in the detail that deserved attention from the library world.

GST on digital products

The Treasurer confirmed the Government's intent to introduce new legislation targeting multinational companies, including internet giants, to clamp down on tax avoidance, and to impose GST on digital product imports such as ebooks.

Public service

There will be a modest benefit for government libraries, the National Library of Australia and other federally funded cultural institutions from the reduction of the efficiency dividend for government departments from 2.5% in the current financial year to 1% by 2017-2018. However, further targeted Department reviews are planned, which could result in more public service job losses.

Arts

The Australia Council for the Arts will lose \$104.7million over four years, with the cash moving to the Ministry for the Arts to fund a new National Programme for Excellence in the Arts. The Australia Council is also required to save \$1.8m a year from 2015-2016 to 2018-2019 by way of operating efficiencies.

Communications

The Digital Transformation Office will be established as a separate agency within the Department of Communications with effect from 1 July 2015. Public libraries provide an important link between government and citizens and should be a natural fit with the new agency.

The Children's e-Safety Commissioner will formally commence the role by 1 July 2015. The Commissioner will be an independent statutory office within the ACMA and functions will include a complaints system for cyber-bullying material and promoting online safety for children – aims which connect with the eSmart Libraries initiative for public libraries and Project 13 for school libraries.

Funding for the annual Stay Smart Online campaign, supported by school and public libraries, remained steady at \$0.5m per annum through to 2018-2019.

Education

The portfolio budget included a focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics, including data and information management), and on early childhood education, both of which play to the library agenda.

The Government announced continued funding, but \$4.6 million in savings over three years, for the Australian Early Development Census (formerly the Australian Early Development Index), which tracks five-year-olds' abilities in a series of domains, including literacy.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) gained an additional \$5 million in 2015-2016 to continue the preservation of non-digital documentary and AV materials in its collection. The funding was taken from the Higher Education Participation Programme.

It was forecast that net international student migration would increase from 88,000 in 2014 to 140,000 in 2017-2018 as a result of new visa streamlining measures and post-study work arrangements. Making higher education more affordable and easier to access for international students could take some of the pressure off university library budgets further down the track.

There was a move to reprioritise existing medical training programs to target assistance to rural areas through the General Practice Rural Incentives Program. This could mean increased demand for online and remote access to health information and library services.

The continuation of the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure, with \$150 million in 2016-2017, was a welcome recognition of the importance of evidence-based academic research (support for research was also evident in the Industry portfolio). However, there were concerns that further science research funding took cash away from the Sustainable Research Excellence program, which helps fund libraries and research staff.

Also welcome was the injection of funding for teacher education, which could be seen to demonstrate a commitment to literacy and learning.

Health

Cuts to health program funding of nearly \$1 billion over five years could put further pressure on health library budgets, but there were also opportunities for greater engagement of library and information professionals.

An initial investment of \$400 million will be made in the Medical Research Future Fund, with a further \$1 billion to follow.

A further \$485.1 million over four years was signalled for the Personally Controlled Electronic Health Records program, which will be renamed My Health Records. ALIA Health Libraries Australia has a special interest in supporting health service consumers to access quality information.

The Department of Health is earmarked for \$113.1 million in savings over five years through operating efficiencies, de-duplication of work with other agencies and other forms of rationalisation. However, \$10 million over four years will be reinvested to develop the in-house data analytical, economics and research capacity of the Department, which will draw on the skills of information professionals.

Infrastructure and regional development

The Government will provide \$50 million over three years to extend the Community Development Grants program and there will be \$45 million over two years for a new program to fund small capital projects put forward by community groups to deliver social benefits.

Prime Minister and Cabinet

The Government will put \$6.7 million over three years into the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, to provide internet training (including essential infrastructure such as computers, printers and internet access points) to approximately 75 remote communities. This replaces the existing National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access.

The full set of Budget papers can be found at www.budget.gov.au.

For more information, contact advocacy@alia.org.au.