



Submission in response to the Australian Government Inquiry into Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions

22 October 2020

1. About us

Australian Library and Information Association

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. On behalf of our 5,000 personal and institutional members, we provide the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support. ALIA is the peak body for public, school, university, TAFE and special libraries. We work closely with the Council of Australian University Librarians and National and State Libraries Australia.

ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance

The Australian Public Library Alliance is part of ALIA and represents the interests of the nation's 1500 public libraries. Offering books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, WiFi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, these libraries are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource.

- More than 9 million registered users in 2018-19 and more than 110 million visits to libraries, 51 million visits to library websites.
- More than 273,000 programs eg storytime, Be Connected, attracted over 7.4 million attendees.
- Per capita annual cost of \$52.38, funded by councils, state and territory governments.¹

Over the last 20 years, public libraries have increased their role in the digital space, enhancing people's online experiences, helping people connect to this new virtual world, and providing a safety net for those who are in danger of being left behind, particularly in terms of the ability to access government information.

¹ <https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla-public-library-stats-2018-19.pdf>

2. Libraries and the creative and cultural industries

At their core, libraries are where audiences gather to share their love of reading; to listen to authors explain their work; to participate in reading adventures; to experience the sense of wellbeing from escaping into stories; to gain inspiration and content for their own contribution to the world of literature.

Libraries buy books – millions of dollars-worth of books and ebooks every year. They promote books and authors, connecting writers with readers. They help build every new generation of readers by supporting literacy at all ages. Libraries make Australian books accessible to readers today and they preserve these works for future generations.

But that's not all. In recent times, libraries have expanded into the broader arts and culture mix. We have introduced maker spaces, with media labs, music studios, 3D printers and other devices bringing professional quality systems, techniques and ideas within the reach of the whole community. Our new library buildings feature theatre, performance and exhibition areas, inside and outside. Programs have been redesigned to encourage individual and co-creation, so that any person, of any age, can engage in creative practice through their local library.

The State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria published *Creative Communities The cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* in 2014². In its overview, the report states:

'The library has become a place that actively fosters and showcases creativity, while also providing access to knowledge, ideas and discussion. These wide ranging activities bring varied ages and backgrounds together in the one place, creating a key public destination for diverse groups to meet.'

'Library activities are cultural in both senses of the word: cultural in that they animate community life, and cultural in their dedication to the arts, books and ideas. Victorian public libraries are culture-makers and cultural connectors – they spark creativity, inspiration, social understanding and interaction.'

In order to continue to deliver these high quality library services, we need future generations of qualified professionals. A recent ALIA survey³ of more than 1,000 library and information professionals, representing 12% of the workforce with undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, found that 9.9% of Librarians plan to retire in the near future. We have between 300 and 400 Librarians graduating from Australian universities each year, but there is a wide gap between qualified new graduates and retirees (approximately 800 per annum).

We are concerned that the Australian Government's new Job Ready Graduates Package places librarianship in the highest category for student fees and may well impede our ability to recruit the next generation of professionals. We have made representations to the Minister for Education for librarianship to be realigned with IT and education.

² <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Creative-communities-summary-report.pdf>

³ <https://read.alia.org.au/alia-lis-pay-and-employment-snapshot-2020>

3. Responses to the Inquiry Terms of Reference

3.1 The direct and indirect economic benefits and employment opportunities of creative and cultural industries and how to recognise, measure and grow them

ALIA is a founder member of Books Create Australia, with the Australian Booksellers' Association, the Australian Publishers' Association (APA) and the Australian Society of Authors (ASA).

We know that there is a strong demand for Australian books and writing, from book buyers and book borrowers. By rights, we should have a thriving, well-funded book industry, with employment opportunities for creators, a healthy publishing sector and successful independent bookshops. We have a dearth of data, but what we do have tells us that the contribution of literature as an art form to society is undervalued, and this is reflected in low levels of support. For example, at a national level, total literature funding from the Australia Council has decreased by 44% of the past six years, to just over \$5.1 million, and at an individual level, authors earn on average of just \$12,900 a year from their writing⁴.

The Australia Council's most recent national Arts Participation Survey suggests that 72% of the population aged 15 years and over read for pleasure – and this high level of participation is supported by annual public library loans of over 158 million items⁵.

In the absence of Australian Government funding for a major national reading campaign, public libraries and the book industry have delivered the Australian Reading Hour, now Australia Reads, since 2012, on less than \$200,000 per annum. This has provided promotion for Australian books and reading generally, and increased exposure for individual author ambassadors.

We have been grateful for federal Arts Ministers' contributions of \$50,000 per annum for several years, and \$100,000 in 2020 to help transform the campaign into a greatly extended six-month online program. We would welcome continued support as part of a wider response to the funding needs of the literature sector.

3.2 The non-economic benefits that enhance community, social wellbeing and promoting Australia's national identity, and how to recognise, measure and grow them

The benefits of reading for mental health are well documented and a strong culture of reading is essential if we are to improve levels of literacy in Australia. Studies of public libraries' contribution to their communities show that there is a return on investment of at least \$3 for every \$1 invested in terms of social benefits, and the latest study from Victoria in 2018 found the figure to be \$4.30⁶.

⁴ https://research-management.mq.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/122625541/3_Authors_Income.pdf

⁵ <https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla-public-library-stats-2018-19.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Libraries-work.pdf>

3.3 The best mechanism for ensuring cooperation and delivery of policy between layers of government

Public libraries are owned and run by territory governments in ACT and Northern Territory; by local councils with the support of state governments in most states; by the state government in Tasmania. There is no formal relationship between public libraries and the Australian Government, yet many federal programs require the involvement of public libraries as places people go for information and tech help. Examples include the Be Connected program for older Australians, My Health Record and the Census.

Public libraries have established their own highly effective mechanism for collaboration nationally through the ALIA Public Library Alliance and we work closely with National and State Libraries Australia on initiatives of mutual interest and benefit.

3.4 The impact of COVID-19 on the creative and cultural industries

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, libraries moved their services online. Public libraries began livestreaming storytime sessions for young children, to support families in lockdown, and many rang their most vulnerable users to check on their wellbeing and help satisfy their reading needs through home delivery. National, state and territory libraries ramped up their digitisation programs to make new content available to humanities researchers.

On 28 May, ALIA released early results from a nationwide survey, which showed that after book borrowing, social interaction was the biggest loss felt by the community during the COVID-19 lockdown of public libraries. We found that while 87% of respondents missed being able to borrow print books (ebooks remained available 24/7), 44% missed having expert, friendly help from library staff; 40% missed being around other people; 36% missed participating in events and activities for adults, and 20% missed taking part in storytimes with other families (although many libraries offered pre-recorded and livestreamed virtual storytimes).

Libraries outside Victoria have reopened, but some are still limited to 'click and collect' services; others are open for time-limited browsing; many have paused their face-to-face programs, although outdoor spaces are being used to meet social distancing requirements.

3.5 Avenues for increasing access and opportunities for Australia's creative and cultural industries through innovation and the digital environment.

Access to ebooks

During the COVID-19 lockdown, electronic resources such as ebooks, eaudiobooks, online learning programs and databases were the only contact-free materials libraries could provide. Loans of ebooks were already on a growth trajectory in public libraries but soared during March and April. Use of other resources in libraries, such as Ancestry.Com for family history researchers, increased exponentially.

Since the 23 March shutdown, the State Library of NSW has enjoyed 703,611 website visits (20% increase) and 1,500 ebooks have been downloaded (200% increase). NSW public libraries have collectively processed over 800,000 e loans (300% increase) and enjoyed over one million website visits (100% increase).⁷

Coming out of COVID-19, public and school libraries in particular need to find an affordable way of purchasing ebooks, which continues to reward creators and publishers but does not take unreasonable advantage of market supply limitations. For ebooks, libraries seek:

- Fair pricing – popular fiction titles can cost libraries several times the retail price
- Access to the latest releases (some publishers have embargo periods for libraries or choose not to supply libraries with ebooks)
- Simple purchasing models (ebook contract models are overly complex and do not reflect the difference between ebooks and print and the positive benefits which can be derived from the digital format)
- Copyright provisions to be maintained in electronic formats rather than library exceptions being over-ridden by contract terms.

In addition, libraries need reasonable prices for digital resources such as newspapers and databases, and terms which provide remote access for products such as Australian Standards.

These considerations were highly desirable pre-COVID, they have now become essential if libraries are going to continue to provide the services Australians have come to rely on.

Virtual storytimes

In a normal year, Australian public libraries run 121,000 physical storytimes, attracting over 3 million children and caregivers. They're a playful, fun way of encouraging families with young children to read together at home. While many families are keen book borrowers, most are also book buyers, and this makes library storytime a marketing opportunity for publishers, writers and illustrators.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, public libraries were closed and even as libraries reopened, on-site programs were tightly restricted. Working around an uncertain area of copyright, the APA, ASA and ALIA came to an interim agreement that libraries could livestream and record children's storytimes to fill the gap left by the absence of these programs for families with young children.

The agreement has not only provided libraries with the opportunity to stay connected with children and families during the COVID-19 closure of libraries; it has extended their reach to include children and families who can't come to storytime sessions at libraries, but have been able to embrace the online opportunity. This seems to be especially evident in families where both parents are working and can't get to the library, as well as those living in socially disadvantaged areas where transport options are limited but internet access and devices are not.

⁷ Percentage increases are compared to the same reporting period in 2019 (23 March to 15 May)

The current in-principle agreement will lapse at the end of the year and Books Create Australia is actively seeking ways to extend these benefits into 2021.

Digital transformation

Public libraries have seen a big increase in demand for digital services. There is a very high level of trust in public libraries and librarians, which makes these institutions an attractive option even for the most sensitive of topics. Some people find their own way to libraries, for example to seek help filling in their tax form. Others are sent to public libraries by agencies for assistance filling in forms for welfare, immigration, NDIS and so on. This requires one-on-one help, which has a major impact on staffing levels, at the same time raising management issues around privacy of personal information.

With public libraries closed, the loss of internet access for people who can't afford to pay for their own, do not have the digital skills to navigate the internet, or have limited connectivity, has been evident during COVID-19. This has had a significant impact on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in our society. Public libraries are especially well positioned to play an instrumental role in addressing emerging vulnerabilities and are essential if all Australians are to have access to the internet.

In the US, the Library Services and Technology Act⁸ is a federal program exclusively for libraries, with funds distributed through a grants scheme to support digitally-enabled communities. We propose that, coming out of COVID-19, the Australian Government create a fund in Australia to recognise the contribution of local government-funded public libraries in enabling its services to be provided online, at a reduced cost centrally.

4. Recommendations

From the issues noted above, we have the following three specific recommendations for the Inquiry.

1. Align librarianship with IT and education in the Job Ready Graduates plan

Move Librarianship and Information Management to Cluster 2 of the new Job Ready Graduates scheme, together with IT and education. This would more accurately reflect the role and value of the library and information sector and would help ensure that we are able to recruit and train the graduates we need for our future workforce.

2. Invest in Australian books, writers and reading

Confirm the Australian Government as an ongoing funding partner for the Australia Reads book industry campaign, with an annual commitment for at least the next three years (2021-2022 to 2024-2025) to provide certainty to the campaign organisers.

⁸ <https://www.imls.gov/grants/grants-state/purposes-and-priorities-lsta>

3. Promote public libraries as centres for digital transformation of government services

Create a funding stream for public libraries to access grants to help speed the process of digital transformation of government services.

In addition, we support the submission of the Australian Libraries Copyright Committee, seeking to improve access to online programs and services through the current proposed amendments to the Copyright Act,

We also support submissions by GLAM Peak and National and State Libraries Australia.

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