Submission to the
Australia in the Asian Century
Taskforce

The Asian Century and the role of the Australian library and information sector

1. Introduction

The Australian Library and Information Association welcomes the establishment of the Australia in the Asian Century Task Force.

The Australian Library and Information Association [ALIA][1] is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. It is 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.

This submission addresses the question 'What does the Asian century mean for Australia?' It makes recommendations in two key areas: Australia's knowledge of Asia, and ways of deepening engagement between Asia and Australia in the sphere of civil society in which library and information services are centred.

2. Summary

Recommendation 1

This submission recommends that the National Library's Electronic Resources Australia program be funded to establish and maintain a national Asian Information Consortium.   The Asian Information Consortium would manage the purchase and national licensing of Asian-language and Asian-related online databases and products. The goal of this is to provide national access to online information on Asia for all Australians, whoever they are and wherever they live, whether in capital cities or regional Australia.

Recommendation 2

This submission recommends that University repositories give high priority to the preservation of and continued access to Australian-created research content on Asia into the future.

Recommendation 3

This submission recommends that Ausaid include the library sector in its long term planning and in consultation with ALIA develop new grant programs to deliver strategic skills to the region in identified areas of needs such as digitisation, digital preservation and professional development.

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[1] http://www.alia.org.au/

3. Australia's knowledge of Asia: how important is Asia literacy?

Australia's increasing linkages with the Asian region – economic, political, cultural, demographic – means it has never been more important to be informed and knowledgeable about our neighbours.

There is a consensus evinced in many reports, forums and discussions both published and un-published that Australian society lacks a general understanding and appreciation of Asian culture, what some would label as "Asia literacy" (see Asialink Asia Society National Forum, *Mapping our future in the Asian Century*, *Maximizing Australia's Asia Knowledge* 2002).

This submission is particularly interested in the information and knowledge services available and accessible to businesses, government agencies, students, schools, teachers, universities, researchers, communities and the everyday Australian that will provide the resources to develop Australia's Asian cultural literacy.

Knowledge and awareness of other cultures can be measured in many ways, but one key factor is the level of access citizens have to reliable and accurate information about other countries and cultures. On a day-to-day level in Australia this may be reflected through the broadcast media, but on a deeper level it is achieved through freely available access to books, articles, newspapers, government records, databases and other permanent and more authoritative sources.

While Australia is an acknowledged centre of study, writing and teaching on Asia, relatively few Australian research libraries have strong, comprehensive collections on Asia that support in-depth research across a wide variety of disciplines, supported by skilled and knowledgeable staff. Collection-building and support for researchers has instead tended to be program-driven, partial and ad hoc. Exceptions to this include the collections of the National Library and the Australian National University and to a lesser extent the Universities of Sydney, Melbourne, Monash and Queensland.

In the local community, public libraries have responded to the changing demographics of their local communities and now provide services to a growing population of Asian-language speaking readers. Many libraries struggle to find the specialist skills they need to provide these services.

4. The digital revolution in Asia

As Australia's need for Asia-related information grows, Asian economic growth has brought about a publishing boom in Asia and a digital revolution in China, Japan and Korea. There have been huge advances in all forms of publishing, with increases in price, quantity and quality. China's economic development brought with it a rapid uptake of new technology, massive expansion of the National Library of China's digitisation programs and the development of extensive online databases and e-book products. Japanese publishers have begun to allow foreign access to online databases for the first time, while the National Diet Library of Japan was funded for a major retrospective digitisation

program. Korea, possibly the most advanced adopter of technology in the world, has companies offering sophisticated products at extremely high prices.

The increased availability of e-books and online newspaper and article databases offers unparalleled access to digital information from China, Japan and Korea, while full-text online access offers a solution to the problems of providing access to information across geographic, social or sectoral boundaries.

However, these developments come at a time when Australian library collection development budgets are in decline and staff numbers are dwindling. Individual libraries struggle to afford new Asian language products and lack the staff expertise to negotiate with publishers and vendors. The relatively small number of users within each subscribing institution cannot justify the high cost of some products. This is taking place just as Australia's own demographic change means there is a growing audience for information and reading on Asia at all levels, not only that of reaching and research.   Australia is in danger of falling behind.

5.   Lack of coordinating mechanisms

One solution to the provision of database access would be to coordinate consortium purchasing for institutions interested in the product and achieve some economies of scale and efficiencies. However there is no single consortium able to purchase and license Asian e-resources for Australian libraries in different sectors, whether national/state, public, university or government. This segmentation applies whether the resources are in English language or an Asian language. Existing purchasing consortia include those for universities (Council of Australian University Librarians)[2], the national and state libraries (National and State Libraries Australasia)[3] and the National Library's Electronic Resources Australia program[4].

The National Library has secured remote access conditions for its own registered NLA users for a selected number of Asian language e-resources. However, it has no resource to develop this into a national service. Public and university libraries in regional and metropolitan areas alike do not have the funding or expertise to purchase and offer access to these electronic resources.

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[2] www.**caul**.edu.au/

[3] www.**nsla**.org.au/

[4] www.**era.nla**.gov.au/

Asia for all Australians, whoever they are and wherever they live, whether in capital cities or regional Australia.

Such a national approach will result in:

- A more efficient use of public funding to improve education outcomes
- Directed and strategic delivery of services to the broader community through the library network
- Equitable access to information nationwide particularly to those located in regional Australia
- Creation of a pool of content that would harness the potential of the National Broadband Network

We believe a national approach is timely and necessary as Australia moves towards further integration with Asia. It is envisioned that a national consortium could also serve to provide expert advice on resource development, licenses, copyright/intellectual property laws and other Asia-specific issues to Australian libraries. It would facilitate collaborative collection building in Australian libraries and work to coordinate partnerships and collaborations between Australian members and their Asian counterparts.

6. Preserving Australian research content on Asia

Australia's reputation for outstanding academic research on Asia was enhanced in the 1990s by the early adoption of new technology to create new research resources. Examples are the Malay Concordance Project (MCP)[5], pioneered by the late Dr. Ian Proudfoot, and the Southeast Asian Serials Index (SASI)[6], produced by the Menzies Library, ANU. Both these resources opened up access to previously hidden content for research and study.

The advance of technology itself now threatens the continued existence of both of these resources and probably many other similar databases with Asian content. Institutional, technical and resource priorities mean that MCP and SASI are threatened with obsolescence and may soon be no longer accessible.

It is ironic that as we observe cultural heritage being lost from institutions in the region, we are unable to prevent valuable Australian research content on Asia being lost from our own. In a budget climate in which all resources are competed for, it is to be hoped that a reprioritisation would enable Asian research content to be transferred to new systems

Recommendation 2

University repositories give high priority to the preservation of and continued access to Australian-created research content on Asia into the future

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[5] www.*mcp.anu.edu.au/*

[6] http://anulib.anu.edu.au/sasi/

7. Deepening engagement: civil society initiatives

Many countries of the Asian region remain less well developed and of all spheres of society, libraries frequently suffer from lack of funding and resources. In this environment, cultural heritage may be lost and collections deteriorate. Librarians are poorly paid and trained and lack the skills and resources needed to manage collections and prepare for the digital age. Citizens lack access to information at all levels of society.

Some Australian assistance programs in recent years have included a library component (the Australian Youth Ambassador scheme, the Endeavour Executive Awards, rebuilding of school libraries in Aceh) which have had good results. However these are relatively uncoordinated and much more needs to be done.

Due to budget restrictions the National Library now allocates no funding to regional cooperation initiatives, and ALIA has no program of active engagement with library associations in the region.

This submission does not recommend capital projects or lengthy consultancies. We believe colleagues in the region need skills, advice and contacts to prepare their own plans for the future. Professional linkages such as these are vital to draw regional librarians into networks of colleagues and expose them to new ideas and influences.

For example, there is a strong demand from the less developed countries of the region for practical assistance with digitisation and digital preservation programs. This is a need which could be met by partnerships with Australian libraries undertaking exactly these tasks, but in a climate of reduced funding in Australian institutions, such additional initiatives are simply ruled out.

The overall cost of funding training programs, staff exchanges and conference and meeting attendance need not be large. It needs a management overhead and should be scaled to the capacity of the organisation both delivering and receiving the assistance. With these pieces in place, the potential for professional development on both sides is strong and sows the seeds of deeper engagement in the future.

Recommendation 3

This submission recommends that Ausaid include the library sector in its long term planning and in consultation with ALIA develop new grant programs to deliver strategic skills in identified areas of needs such as digitisation, digital preservation and professional development

Authors

George Miller (retd)

Dr Amy Chan, Southeast Asia Liaison, Division of Information, Australian National University

Marie Sexton (retd)

Amelia McKenzie, Director Overseas Collections Management, National Library