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AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
TO THE
REPORT INTO LIBRARIES IN THE ONLINE
ENVIRONMENT
BY THE
SENATE ENVIRONMENT, COMMUNICATIONS,
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION
TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS

JUNE 2004

Australian Government Response to Senate Committee Inquiry into Libraries in the Online Environment

Introduction

While the Inquiry covered a wide range of matters relating to libraries and online services, the main focus of the report was on the needs of public libraries and their users, role of the National Library of Australia (NLA) in online information and service delivery to Australians and the potential for the Australian Government to support that role.

Overall, the Australian Government considers that the principles this Inquiry promotes are being pursued, particularly matters relating to national information strategies. While the Australian Government does not have direct responsibility for public libraries, through a number of mechanisms, including support for the National Library of Australia (NLA), the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), and support of the Cultural Ministers Council (CMC), the Australian Government collaborates with relevant State and Territory and peak library groups on issues affecting the sector and especially encourages cross-sectoral approaches to effect solutions. Since the Committee's report was tabled some functions formerly managed by the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) are being undertaken by AGIMO, while others are now administered by DCITA. These changes are reflected in the Australian Government response.

Recommendation	Response	Comments
1 The Committee recommends that the National Library of Australia receive additional funding to provide improved access to Kinetica for all Australian libraries and end users.	Noted. The recently announced redevelopment of the Kinetica service will provide improved access for all Australian libraries. The operational and cost implications for providing direct public access is a longer term issue that will be better understood following the completion of the Kinetica redevelopment and relevant reviews underway.	Kinetica currently services the majority of libraries throughout Australia and there is limited scope to increase the number of libraries accessing the service. However, a significant redevelopment of Kinetica to improve access quality for library users is being proposed by the NLA and was announced on 3 December 2003. This redevelopment process is consistent with longer-term objectives of improving end-user access to databases of electronic and print resources generally. While the redevelopment of Kinetica will provide improved access through a simple, easy to use search interface and other enhancements, many small and medium sized libraries will not be able to afford to provide access directly to their users as Kinetica will still operate on a cost recovery model. Kinetica charges will remain competitive compared to overseas alternatives such as OCLC. Australian Government support provided to the NLA fulfils an important leadership role in library sector. However capital funding and other support for State and local government libraries is normally the responsibility of the relevant State, Territory or local government.

Recommendation	Response	Comments
<p>2</p> <p>The Committee recommends that whenever the Australian Government advertises its electronic services, it adds a statement to the effect that further information can be obtained from the local public library.</p>	<p>Not agreed.</p>	<p>There are practical issues in including a reference to public libraries in Australian Government advertisements which refer to electronic services. The Government generally includes a call to action in all advertising. This may be to telephone a call centre and/or visit a web site. In the case of television and radio advertisements there is a critical time element which limits the amount of voice-over time available to make announcements, sometimes as short as fifteen seconds. To add a line referring to the availability of electronic services through a public library could unduly curtail the amount of time available for the core message to be delivered and this could negatively impact on the effectiveness of the communication task.</p>
<p>3</p> <p>The Committee recommends:</p> <p>(a) the continuation of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Community Heritage Grants digitisation program; and</p> <p>(b) the addition of a new National Heritage Grants program for peak cultural institutions to assist in the digitisation of their collections.</p>	<p>3a) Agreed. The Community Heritage Grants program is a successful initiative that will be continued. Digitisation is only one of the key activities encouraged in the community organisations targeted by the program.</p> <p>3b) Noted. The issues raised are being addressed in the context of the portfolio Digitisation Strategy in progress.</p>	<p>3a) The Community Heritage Grants program objective is to broadly assist community organisations preserve locally owned documentary heritage materials, small amounts of financial support are provided for digitisation activities, in addition to a range of other collection preservation support mechanisms including significance assessments and preservation planning. A diverse range of community organisations benefit from the program, from genealogical and historic societies to local archives, galleries, libraries and museums. Representatives from community organisations awarded grants also participate in a two-day practical preservation workshop where they receive training and advice to apply to their own collections.</p> <p>The 2003 grants mark a decade of helping Australian community organisations preserve cultural heritage collections (through the current program and its predecessor programs). In 2003 a record number of grants (50) and funding (\$219,000) were approved. The program, currently administered by the NLA, has five Australian Government funding partners. In addition to the NLA, National Archives of Australia (NAA) and the DCITA, two recent additional funding partners include the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs and the Australian Film Commission (AFC).</p> <p>However, from time to time program adjustments are appropriate. As with many similar programs designed to support regional community needs, the program focus is reconsidered periodically to ensure that the program framework remains responsive to the needs of its target group. Plans for 2004 are in progress.</p> <p>3b) The Australian Government, through DCITA and portfolio collecting agencies (NLA, NAA, National Gallery of Australia, National Museum of Australia and the AFC), is currently undertaking an examination of digital collection objectives, priorities and outcomes as part of the Review of Cultural Agencies. This will inform the preparation of a Digital Collections Strategy.</p>

Recommendation	Response	Comments
<p>4 The Committee recommends that the Australian Research Infrastructure Committee consider the question of the availability online of Australian postgraduate theses as a matter of priority.</p>	<p>Agreed.</p> <p>The information captured and disseminated from postgraduate theses will form one part of the total information which will be made accessible through projects administered by Department of Education, Science and Training.</p>	<p>As part of overall improvements to Australia's Research Information Infrastructure Framework, the Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson recently agreed to provide funding of \$540,000 to the University of New South Wales to lead a project titled <i>Australian Digital Theses Program Expansion and Redevelopment (ADT)</i>. ADT will redevelop the existing central metadata repository of the Australian Digital Theses Program (ADT) increasing its coverage and utility to the national and international research community. The repository's content will expand to include metadata about all Australian higher degree theses. The ADT project is a very important part of the wider national Systematic Information Infrastructure projects which have been announced by Dr Nelson and are overseen by the Australian Research Infrastructure Committee (ARIC).</p> <p>Other projects that will also underpin Australia's Research Information Infrastructure Framework are:</p> <p>Meta Access Management System Projects (MAMS): MAMS will provide an essential "middleware" component to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of Australia's higher education research information infrastructure. It will develop a new conceptual architecture capable of supporting multiple, independent models, and which is implemented locally within organisations, with the potential for inter-institutional communication.</p> <p>Towards an Australian Partnership for Sustainable Repositories (APSR): APSR will have an overall focus on the critical issues of the access, continuity and sustainability of digital collections. It will also build on a base of demonstrators for digital continuity and sustainability, embedded in developmental repository facilities within partner institutions.</p> <p>The Australian Research Repositories Online to the World (ARROW): ARROW will identify and test a software solution or solutions to support best practice institutional digital repositories comprising e-prints, digital theses and electronic publishing. It will develop a repository and associated metadata to support independent scholars (those not associated with institutions).</p>

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<p>5</p> <p>If there are no alternative funding mechanisms for ongoing research into the identification and testing of adaptive technologies for the use of online equipment in public libraries by persons with disabilities, the Committee recommends the funding of another round of AccessAbility grants.</p>	<p>Noted pending further consideration.</p>	<p>The Australian Government through, DCITA's Networking the Nation Secretariat, provided \$1.5 million in each of 1998-99 and 1999-2000 for <i>AccessAbility</i> grants to support innovative projects that help people with disabilities gain improved access to online information and communications services. In May 2002 all funded projects were completed and the program was finalised.</p> <p>The Australian Government is further investigating the matter of e-accessibility in discussions between DCITA and the Office of Disability.</p> <p>The Office of Disability aims to ensure that society is inclusive of people with disabilities, their families and carers. The Office provides a direct link between the disability community and government, working towards improving access and encouraging the involvement of people with disabilities as members of the community. This is achieved through developing policies that respond to people with disabilities needs and their capacities for participation. These include managing disability and carer specific income support and compensation provisions; raising the awareness of Australian Government organisations and businesses about making their services, facilities and employment opportunities accessible; and working with the State and Territory governments to fund support services.</p>
<p>6</p> <p>The Committee recommends:</p> <p>(a) that the Cultural Ministers' Council appoint a standing libraries working group to provide regular reports on library and information matters which need to be addressed as a priority;</p> <p>(b) that the proposed Cultural Ministers' Council standing libraries working group develop, in consultation with other interested parties, a national information policy; and</p> <p>(c) that NOIE be required to consult with the appropriate national library representatives on all matters of substance affecting the library community and the online provision of services.</p>	<p>6a) Noted.</p> <p>6b) Noted.</p> <p>6c) Agreed in principle.</p>	<p>6a) This matter will be raised with the Cultural Ministers Council. On 19 February 2004 Cultural Ministers Council agreed to establish the Collections Council of Australia to provide high level strategic advice to Governments on the priority issues facing archives, galleries, libraries and museums in Australia. Any proposal for the Cultural Ministers Council to establish a Libraries Working Group will need to be considered against the new role envisaged for the Collections Council.</p> <p>6b) This matter will be raised with the Cultural Ministers Council.</p> <p>6c) AGIMO and DCITA will continue to consult with the library community, through the National Library of Australia and appropriate library sector organisations, on matters of substance affecting the library community.</p>

Recommendation	Response	Comments
<p>7</p> <p>The Committee recommends:</p> <p>(a) that the Australian Government negotiate with telecommunications carriers to establish an 'e-rate' or discount rate for broadband access to public libraries and that, if negotiations are not successful, consider imposing a requirement on carriers under the Universal Service Obligation arrangement; and</p> <p>(b) that further funds be allocated under an expanded National Broadband Strategy for expanding broadband access in libraries.</p>	<p>7a) Not agreed.</p> <p>7b) Not agreed.</p>	<p>7a) The Australian Government recognises that broadband connectivity is an increasingly important element in the economic and social development of Australia. It is the Government's view that innovative and competitively priced broadband services are ultimately best provided by a sustainable market. Government's role is to encourage the development of the market to provide services to all Australians by maintaining a flexible pro-competitive regulatory regime and to assist with targeted funding and leadership.</p> <p>Building on the work of the Broadband Advisory Group and the findings of the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry, the Australian Government has launched a National Broadband Strategy, developed in consultation with all State and Territory governments, and is currently working with them on developing an Action Plan for the Strategy. The Australian Government has allocated significant funding to deliver improved broadband outcomes across Australia.</p> <p>As part of its commitment to the Action Plan the Australian Government has committed more than \$140m of new funding to boost broadband access and take up.</p> <p>However, the Government does not support the Committee's recommendation. It is the Government's view that regulatory settings that promote the competitive supply of broadband services together with targeted funding initiatives are the appropriate means for facilitating the delivering of sustainable low cost broadband services to users.</p> <p>As part of its contribution to the Action Plan of the National Broadband Strategy the Australian Government has provided funding for the Coordinated Communications Infrastructure Fund and the establishment of Demand Aggregation Brokers. Both schemes are designed to facilitate greater access to broadband in a number of identified priority sectors including regional, rural and remote areas, communities and education. It is possible that connectivity in libraries could be included in projects funded under these programs.</p> <p>7b) It is not envisaged that further funding will be allocated from the budget to the Strategy to specifically target broadband access in libraries. Projects that will expand broadband connectivity in libraries may also be included in state and regional based programs that will be incorporated in the Strategy Action Plan.</p>

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<p>8. Noting the requirement that the <i>Copyright Amendment (Digital Agenda) Act 2000</i> be reviewed after three years of operation, the Committee recommends that that review consider the Act's extension to digital material.</p>	<p>Not Agreed.</p>	<p>The Government is already addressing the question of legal deposit of digital material through other processes. The Department in conjunction with the Attorney-General's Department is in the process of developing a model to extend legal deposit to electronic and audiovisual materials, in consultation with the NLA and ScreenSound Australia. This model aims to minimise compliance costs for industry and meet the preservation and access needs of the institutions. Discussions between these parties are well advanced. Any action or plan regarding Intellectual Property will take into account any commitments under the USA Free Trade Agreement.</p>
<p>9 The Committee recommends: (a) that the National Library of Australia identify a number of key databases for which national site licensing might be desirable; and (b) that additional Australian Government funding be extended to the National Library of Australia for this purpose.</p>	<p>9a) Noted, site licensing arrangements are in progress. 9b) Not agreed.</p>	<p>9a) The Council of Australian State Libraries (CASL), which includes the NLA, formed the Consortia and Licensing Working Group (CLWG) in October 1999. The CLWG investigates and negotiates site licensing on behalf of contributing consortium members, including the State and some public libraries and peak library groups. 9b) Australian Government support provided to the NLA fulfils an important leadership role in library sector. However capital funding and other support for State and local government libraries is normally the responsibility of the relevant State, Territory or local government. Additional funds for this purpose can not be met by the Australian Government at this time.</p>
<p>10 The Committee recommends: (a) that the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) continue to consult closely with the library community over the development of the register of Australian Government publications; (b) that NOIE publicise the availability in public libraries of the online register; and (c) that NOIE commission research to ascertain the level of public awareness of government information and the means of access thereto.</p>	<p>10a) Agreed. 10b) Noted. 10c) Agreed in principle</p>	<p>10a) AGIMO will continue to consult with the library community, through the NLA and appropriate library sector organisations, on the continued development of the Publications Register. 10b) Strategies for promoting the Publications Register will be explored during the consultations with the library community on its continued development. 10c) Research into the level of public awareness of Government information and services is already undertaken by a variety of Australian Government agencies, both on an individual agency basis and collaboratively, where factors such as customer segmentation indicate there is merit in doing so. This approach reflects the devolved operating frameworks of Australian Government information and services. AGIMO will take an active role in encouraging and facilitating collaboration as well as the sharing of research between agencies in order to improve the discoverability of, and access to, Government information services.</p>

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<p>11 Where there is shared responsibility for public library funding between State and local Government, the Committee recommends that the States significantly increase their share of public library funding, moving towards matching local government levels of contribution.</p>	<p>Noted.</p>	<p>This is a matter for individual State and Territory Governments.</p>