

# Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
References Committee

## **Inquiry into the progress and future direction of life-long learning**

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# Progress and future direction of lifelong learning inquiry

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This submission focuses on the need

- 1 To see lifelong learning or 'learning for life' as broader than formal, institutional, education.
- 2 For the national government to provide leadership and to work with local and state governments in enabling the national network of 1600 public libraries to extend its existing contribution to lifelong learning.
- 3 For schools, TAFE and universities to reconceptualise their content focused curricula and pedagogies to develop students' information literacy as a prerequisite for lifelong learning in an information intensive world.

## 1 Learning for life

Since the 1996 publication of the UNESCO Delors Report *Learning: the treasure within* lifelong learning has become an educational policy icon throughout the developed world. However it will remain largely rhetorical if those in formal education think no further than curricula, pedagogies, assessment and certification. There is more to education and lifelong learning than institutional education and certification, yet the lifelong learning agenda is at risk of being dominated by those who view it narrowly. This is despite the evidence that people with a negative experience of institutional education are alienated from it, and are unlikely to pursue lifelong learning through it.

## 2 Public libraries

The largest force—and at an average cost of 7c per Australian per day by far the most cost effective—for education in Australia is its network of nearly 1600 public libraries. Indirectly local government is the largest educational provider in Australia, although typically this is not yet recognised by local government. These libraries, used by about 13 million Australians and directly accessible now to 99% of the population, are the most heavily trafficked public buildings in Australia. They are, increasingly, attractive and accessible hubs of community engagement and social capital development, equipped with public internet access and staff support to enable older people, in particular, to develop their computer fluency. Public libraries have always contributed to continuous learning through promotion of literacy, the basic building block from which individuals can develop increasing levels of information literacy.

Public libraries are the only public agency with a lifelong 'cradle to grave' clientele. In response they provide, for example BookStart programs for babies, foster literacy, homework centres for students, print, large print, video and audio resources for the homebound or those in nursing homes. Those in formal education tend to have little

awareness of what public libraries offer already, and can do, to support learners at all stages of life.

Mr C Batt MBE, the Director of the UK's just completed £100 million investment in public library ICT observes

There is a vision of lifelong learning as an extension of more formal learning structures... There is nothing wrong with that but it is my firm belief that the public library can and does address a broader agenda which is about *learning for life* rather than lifelong learning.

Learning is not simply about following accredited courses to obtain qualifications. It is about gaining knowledge to lead better, more fulfilling lives. *Such learning comes frequently in very small quanta...* Public libraries are unique in the way that they can allow those tiny portions of learning to invisibly change people's lives.

Mark Latham MP, is also correct in asserting that

*Libraries are a victim of Australia's complex and overlapping federal system of government.* The quality of service differs greatly across the country. Libraries are no less important to the prospects of lifelong learning in Australia than colleges and campuses... the focus is moving beyond the classroom and into the learning institutions of civil society. *This is the natural terrain of public libraries...* For those of us who believe in an inclusive and just society, libraries are at the vanguard of our hopes and policy plans.

Public libraries already make a significant contribution to lifelong learning on a meagre total national funding of about \$550 million pa, half the annual expenditure of just one large university with 40,000 students.

That funding needs to be at least doubled in real terms—to 14c per Australian per day—if public libraries are to fulfil their unique potential to support lifelong learning, particularly in rural and regional areas, and in lower socio economic suburbs of the larger cities.

This requires better investment in them by the three levels of government. In particular it requires long overdue leadership from the national government in, initially, commissioning a comprehensive report on the condition of the nation's public library system, and its existing and potential contribution to developing lifelong learners.

### **3 Information literacy**

A capacity for lifelong learning requires two things

- *Conventional literacy* the development of which needs to commence *before* children attend school, with parents reading to their children as babies. As educator and author Mem Fox has written in *Reading magic*

If every parent understood the huge educational benefits and intense happiness brought about by reading aloud to their children, and if every parent read aloud a minimum of three stories a day to the children in their lives, we could probably wipe out illiteracy within one generation.

The experience in the UK of 10 years of the national *BookStart* scheme through public libraries and health centres is that it is making a measurable difference to literacy development in children, at very low cost. A number of Australian local governments and the State of Tasmania have implemented similar schemes (the

writer of this submission is undertaking a national survey to determine this provision). However a nationally coordinated scheme is required to ensure that all Australian parents and children benefit.

- *Information literacy* a need identified 30 years ago in the context of an increasingly information-complex society. Information literacy is a concept which comprehends computer or IT literacy, and is defined as ‘recognition of a need for information, and the capacity to identify, access, evaluate and apply the needed information’.

Many educational institutions, including universities—led by the University of South Australia—now identify several graduate qualities or learning outcomes for their students. These typically include one or more relating to a capacity for lifelong learning, and information literacy as a prerequisite for it.

Australia has been a world leader in promoting this concept and issue, most recently through the establishment of the Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy, also an initiative of the University of South Australia. However the rhetoric of many institutions is not yet matched by needed educational change. Much of Australian education remains focused on rapidly outdated content transmission. This is a domesticating form of education which will not develop independent, and information literate, lifelong learners able to ask the well-informed questions needed to challenge elected, public, and corporate decision makers. These questions will be increasingly needed if a democratic society and its institutions are to be sustained.

These issues, including that of systematic attention to information literacy, are canvassed well in chapter 6 ‘Structuring the curriculum for lifelong learning competence’ of the 1994 NBEET Commissioned Report no 28 *Developing lifelong learners through undergraduate education*.

Ten years on from that investigation it would be timely to assess its impact and the extent to which its key recommendations have been adopted.

More broadly, given the lack of connection between the three levels of formal education—primary, secondary, tertiary—about information literacy as a prerequisite for lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a national investigation of why this is so, is suggested.

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