

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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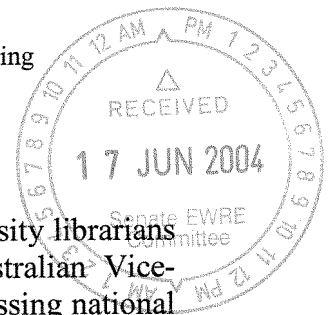
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Introduction

The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) comprises the university librarians or library directors of the universities eligible to be members of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. The Council represents its member libraries in addressing national issues that relate to the improvement of access to the information resources fundamental to the advancement of learning, teaching and research. The rapid, continuing developments in information and communication technologies provide the catalyst for extension of partnerships between librarians and university teachers to address emerging issues that affect the delivery of higher education courses. Among these shared issues is the concern to prepare graduates for life-long learning, recognising that professional competence today requires the continual refreshment of knowledge.

CAUL members also recognise the value of unstructured and informal learning and the interest many people have in broadening their education through private study or research. University libraries in Australia have typically been open for public use to meet this need and for community benefit.

Learning to Learn: Information Literacy

Most universities today include some reference to preparation for life-long learning among the attributes of their graduates. Librarians are involved in designing and delivering instruction to give students the skills to become independent learners, and to be informed and critical users of information. The provision of information literacy training is now a major activity in university libraries, and CAUL has established an Information Literacy Working Group to develop assessment instruments and measures for information literacy and work with other related organisations. Chief among the latter is the Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy which has developed an information literacy framework.¹

Re-training and structured learning

A notable feature of today's university is the change in the composition of the student body. Increasing numbers of mature age students are enrolled. Many of them are in postgraduate programs that either upgrade their existing qualifications or equip them with the credentials to re-direct their careers to new areas. Few such students have the time or money to study full-time – most are earner learners. If they choose to enrol as external students they may study with a university in another city or state.

Universities are devoting many resources to meeting the needs of such students, especially by taking advantage of the internet to communicate and deliver content online. Libraries led the way early by moving to include licensed online databases among their resources. Once upon a time the distance student suffered two major disadvantages – the inability to communicate easily with their lecturers and the absence of access to library resources and services. Email and the ability to offer reference materials, e-books, and large numbers of full text journals online together with ready advice and support has transformed the quality of their learning experience.

¹ *Australian and New Zealand information literacy framework: principles, standards and practice*, 2nd edition. Adelaide, Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy, 2004. <http://www.caul.edu.au/info-literacy/InfoLiteracyFramework.pdf> accessed 9 May 2004.

Nevertheless there are still challenges for libraries serving remote students. Because many of them are returning to study after a break some are not as au fait as school leavers with the new technologies. Any knowledge about library-based research they may have acquired as undergraduates was probably print based and is outdated. CAUL libraries address this problem with online advice and by developing web-based instructional packages that reflect the content taught by librarians on-campus.

Off-campus students outside major metropolitan centres continue to be disadvantaged by unequal access to adequate bandwidth, and the cost in time and money when their connection to the internet is slow.

Unstructured Learning

A society that accepts and enables life-long learning as a social and economic good will provide ample opportunities for unstructured learning. Individuals who become life-long learners will seek opportunities to learn as part of their normal life – they will not confine their learning to formal courses. Just-in-time and curiosity-driven learning is often the most effective way of acquiring knowledge.

Since the nineteenth century libraries have been an essential community resource for life-long learning. Much of the idealism that accompanied the establishment of public libraries came from the adult education movement. University libraries in Australia have always opened their doors to independent scholars and researchers.

Today there is more information on the internet than in any library. The internet however lacks the selectivity and organisation of a library, and the naïve user has no way of distinguishing good from bad information, or truth from falsehood. Even in a library many users seeking information outside their own area of knowledge need assistance. Furthermore the most valuable information is locked away behind firewalls, accessible only to those who are prepared to pay, or who can authenticate as members of an organisation that has paid on their behalf. Thus the resources that university libraries provide for their students are not available online to the general public.

The Shrinking Information Commons

Notwithstanding the vast amount of information to be had on the internet, there are two trends that seriously threaten access to information for life-long learning. One is the increasing costs of more serious or academic literature. The other is the current trend in copyright law to lock more and more information behind copyright barriers.

Copyright Law and Moves to Extend the Commons

The restrictions imposed on libraries and their users by a licensing regime for digital materials may be seen as a limitation, though most licenses allow walk-in access and so mean that resources are at least no less available in digital form than they were in print. Trends in copyright law however pose a serious threat in the longer term to public access to information. These trends have been most marked in the United States and the proposed harmonisation of Australian copyright law with the US under Free Trade Agreement makes it important that these trends are understood.

Recent changes to more restrictive US copyright law have been driven by large media interests, but also affect text-based works, especially in digital form. They have resulted in the shrinking of the public domain, or the area within which the intellectual and creative heritage is held in common.

The public domain is a space where intellectual property protection does not apply. When copyrights and patents expire, innovations and creative works fall into the public domain. They may then be used by anyone without permission and without the payment of a licensing fee. A broader concept of the commons includes all creative work and information that is available for public use without penalty or fee.

A rich information commons facilitates the growth and spread of knowledge and invention. Sir Isaac Newton, who lived in a much less restrictive age, said "If I have seen further it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants." Disney drew on the public domain for the great classic fairy tales for his films. It is therefore somewhat ironic that the most recent extension of the term of copyright term was legislated to save Mickey Mouse from the public domain for another twenty years. This is just the latest extension in the US, which has seen the term of copyright protection grow from 14 to 70 years since 1907.

Because of the extensions of the terms of both copyrights and patents in the US and shortly in Australia, little is now entering the public domain. Since the public domain is a treasure trove of information and resources to be used by future generations, many advocates are concerned that its stagnation will make it more difficult for future generations to find creative inspiration.

Of even greater effect has been the automatic protection of copyright to any work. In the US this was the effect of changes to the law in 1976. Whereas in a print environment publishing was an act that required deliberation and the investment of funds, in the digital environment of the internet the negative effect of this shift has become apparent. A person wishing to use material in good faith places themselves in legal jeopardy unless they can contact the copyright owner for permission to do so. One movement that seeks to ameliorate the stifling effect of the law is Creative Commons which provides creators with a simple way to make their work more available. An author or creator can, with a few key strokes, attach a legally enforceable licence to their work that permits a selected range of uses. QUT has taken the lead in Australia to introduce creative Commons licensing here. For details see <http://www.creativecommons.org>.

Academic journal authors are among those who generally seek no payment for their work. In the past they have generally assigned their copyright to publishers. The control by commercial publishers over the output of academic research is the main reason for the inflation in the prices of many journals to the point where they threaten the sustainability of the system of academic communication.

This situation is one of the reasons for the growing interest in universities in Open Access publishing. Whether through the establishment of journals with other income streams than subscriptions, whose contents are free to users, or by establishing repositories of digital copies of articles on an institutional basis, universities and their libraries are encouraging the development of systems for the communication of knowledge that could in time provide rich resources for life-long learning. It is to the credit of the Australian government that it has recognised the importance of this movement, through aligning itself internationally with these

principles² and by commitment of money from Backing Australia's Ability funds to demonstrator projects for institutional repositories.³

² See for example the OECD Declaration on Access to research data from public funding (http://www.oecd.org/document/0,2340,en_2649_34487_25998799_1_1_1_1,00.html)

³ <http://www.dest.gov.au/Ministers/Media/McGauran/2003/10/mcg002221003.asp>