

# 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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**Submitter:** Ms Marie Murphy  
Manager, Policy, Projects and Research

**Organisation:** Australian Library and Information Association

**Address:** PO Box 6335  
KINGSTON ACT 2604

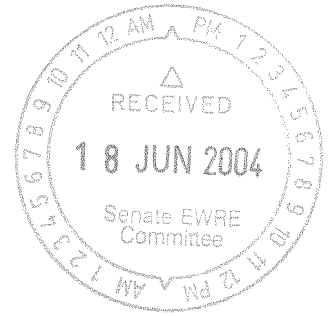
**Phone:** 02 6215 8218

**Fax:** 02 6828 2249

**Email:** [marie.murphy@alia.org.au](mailto:marie.murphy@alia.org.au)

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The Secretary,  
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations  
and Education References Committee  
Suite SG.52, Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector and represents 5 000 individual members, 900 institutional members and the interests of 10.7 million library users. ALIA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's *Inquiry into the progress and future direction of life-long learning*.

Our response focuses on the role libraries play in ensuring access to learning opportunities and in engaging communities in learning activities. Through libraries, members of the community are able to access information resources that encourage life-long learning, find out about educational and learning opportunities available and also take part in learning activities.

**ALIA recommends that policy development focus on creating a learning community infrastructure which draws together all stakeholders, such as educational institutions, employers, industry, libraries as learning providers, adult and community education providers and others, and which enables a cooperative approach to further policy and program development, including the development of funding models open to all stakeholders. In this way libraries, as recognised learning providers, would have direct input into policy development and could access directly funding for the learning initiatives they provide. Libraries, then, would be positioned to maintain and expand the learning programs that their clients have come to expect and the life-long learning goals that the Government aims to achieve.**

In today's society developing technologies are impacting on the way people work, do business and spend their leisure time. Changing social structures mean that Australians already in the workforce or about to enter it, can expect to continue in paid work beyond the age at which workers of earlier generations retired. To remain relevant in the workplace, workers will need to commit to life-long learning and systematically update their skills and knowledge in order to cope with ongoing technological, workplace and social change.

Formal education and training, either in the workplace or through educational institutions such as universities and TAFE, will assist many learners to remain up-to-date and/or extend their knowledge and skills. However, there are many learners, especially older learners, who prefer a more informal learning environment where they are free to learn at their own pace. Libraries have long been recognised as

offering a non-threatening and informal environment where learners can gain access to resources which support their learning.

And now, as new and changing technologies make materials available in a number of different formats – online, print and other media - the role of libraries in enabling access to resources is becoming more significant. Increasingly, learners are seeking the help of libraries and librarians to identify and access learning resources, irrespective of format, so that they can further develop their knowledge and skills.

Between 1999 and 2002, adult attendance at national, state and public libraries increased significantly from 36.8% to 42.1%<sup>1</sup>. Surveys conducted by libraries, together with anecdotal evidence, indicate that a major reason for this is the availability of the internet and online access. This is particularly true, as noted in the Senate report, *Libraries in the online environment*, for young adults and adults aged 55 – 64 years where library attendance jumped from 38.1% to 47.2% and 30.5% to 36.9% in the respective groups<sup>2</sup>.

Free access to the internet and other electronic resources which libraries generally offer their clients might be deemed to explain increased library attendance by adults, particularly by those who have no other avenue of access to the internet and other electronic resources. However, increased adult attendance in libraries is happening at a time when household access to the internet in Australia is growing quickly. In 1998 some 16% of Australian households were connected to the internet compared with 46% in 2002<sup>3</sup>. Access to online information does not depend then on connectivity alone. Library clients have particular expectations that libraries and library staff assist them to locate more efficiently and effectively the information they need for ongoing learning<sup>4</sup>.

But it is not sufficient simply to provide access to new technologies if a client's learning needs are to be fully met<sup>5</sup>. Because of their training, librarians are highly aware of this and as a result, libraries play a very active role in life-long learning by helping people to become information literate so that they can effectively use technology to learn and develop new skills. Consequently, as new technologies are introduced, librarians and libraries have developed and are continuing to develop learning programs which will enable their clients not only to access the multiplicity of resources available – whether in print or electronic format or in other media – but which will also teach them to locate, evaluate and effectively use information to enhance their learning and become information literate.

While many of the programs are aimed at developing the information skills of members of the community in general, librarians also recognise that some of their clients have special needs and develop programs specifically targeted to those groups for example seniors and indigenous peoples - Kelmscott Library introduced a Surfing Seniors educational program to encourage seniors to go online. The program aimed to show seniors the many facilities available on the internet, such as banking and

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<sup>1</sup> ABS Year Book Australia 2003 and 2004

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> ABS 8146.0 *Household use of information technology, 2001-02*

<sup>4</sup> Senate report *Libraries in the online environment*, October 2003

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

shopping, and to develop their skills to explore the web with confidence. The Indigelinks program offered by the Alice Springs Public Library, introduces members of the indigenous community to a restricted version of the internet so they can become familiar with the online environment and develop basic search skills before moving to the World Wide Web.

Such programs – targeted to library clients in general or to clients with special needs – build client confidence in their ability to locate the information they need for ongoing learning through the new technologies that are becoming available. This then helps them to be more accepting of, and be more willing to become involved in other education and training activities now being offered through new media.

Just as new technologies are making information available in different formats, so too the delivery of educational programs to enhance life-long learning is changing. Increasingly learning opportunities are becoming available through the internet. Where learning activities were once most commonly provided in face-to-face mode, now many courses are offered online, in distance mode, etc. Because libraries already have in place learning programs that assist clients to access learning resources, these developments have effectively enhanced the role of libraries in life-long education.

Libraries often become a focal point in the community, particularly in rural and remote areas, where clients can access information about learning opportunities available and the mode in which they are delivered. In many cases libraries offer individuals a starting point where they can find out about the availability of learning activities offered either locally by library information professionals and other education providers or in other modes, including electronic mode. Effectively, then, libraries can be identified as partners with education providers in ensuring that their clients not only have access to learning resources but have the opportunity to discover what learning programs are available to enable them to gain new knowledge and skills.

As indicated above, libraries are very much acknowledged as part of the learning community. This is further demonstrated through initiatives that are being implemented to ensure citizens have greater access to learning opportunities and in which libraries play a key role. For example, the development of the Lithgow Learning Centre and Library was integral to the Lithgow Learning City project. The combination of library services, a technology centre and learning shop supported by appropriately qualified and professional staff, IT services and other facilities enables members of the community to take part in learning activities to enhance and further develop their skills and knowledge. Similarly, in Northtown, Townsville, a Knowledge Centre integrating library services, adult learning and research facilities has been established and provides an important gateway to learning opportunities.

Libraries make an important and significant contribution to life-long learning by providing access to education and information resources, including electronic resources and the internet. Further, libraries offer professional support to assist those seeking access to library resources; libraries run community programs, often in partnership with community education providers, which enable clients to enhance and develop their knowledge and skills. Appendix A offers a sample of the wide variety of learning programs and other educational initiatives in which libraries are involved.

Yet the important role of libraries in supporting life-long learning is not recognised in current funding models. Learning activities offered through libraries are generally funded through the library's own budget and this has implications for the services and learning programs the library can in the longer term provide.

Learning takes place in many contexts, ranging from formal education and training and workplace learning to informal learning and skills development. Our society will be best placed to benefit from the outcomes of ongoing learning when all stakeholders, such as educational institutions, employers, industry, libraries as community education providers and others, are brought together in a rationalised approach to developing and supporting life-long learning programs.

The establishment of a learning community infrastructure which draws together all stakeholders would encourage greater cooperation in the development of policy and programs for life-long learning and could lead to the development of funding models open to all adult learning providers. Access to libraries and learning initiatives through libraries could be factored into the development of policy and programs to encourage life-long learning and libraries, as recognised stakeholders in life-long learning, would have the capacity to seek direct funding for the learning activities they provide. In this way then libraries would be positioned to maintain and expand the learning programs that their clients have come to expect.

Yours sincerely

Marie Murphy  
Manager, Policy, Projects and Research

**Overview of learning opportunities offered through libraries  
- a sample from local news stories**

- Most public libraries offer programs aimed to develop adults' information literacy skills, that is education and training which shows people how to access information via the technology available but which also teaches them how to effectively use and evaluate information once they have located it. State and local public libraries offer information literacy training, for example the State Library of Queensland develops programs that are available to public libraries around the state.
- Kalgoorlie library provides independent learning activities for adult literacy students through a series of specially developed resources including current popular novels rewritten for the adult literacy student and Narkaling audio books with variable speeds of reading to enable students to better link the words they are hearing to the print counterpart.
- Drug information in public libraries project. For example clients at Bathurst library, a participant in the project, were able to learn more about drug information resources and services benefiting from staff trained in this area. 2002
- Redbank Plaza library ran a series of seminars in 2003 on The art of happiness – is it inside or outside? The seminars were a key component of the library's information literacy program with participants having the opportunity to learn the skills needed to access information remotely through select databases and via the internet.
- The ACT Library Service offers English classes to members of the community with a non-English speaking background.
- In 2002 Bordertown Public Library in conjunction with the TAFE Learning Centre undertook training of volunteer English tutors to assist migrants learning English which resulted in regular English classes for migrants being offered at the library.
- Free access to legal information is available state-wide to public library clients through the Legal Information Access Centre based in the State Library of NSW.
- Homework survival seminars were introduced in 2003 at Cessnock City Library. Aimed at helping parents become more confident in using the library and helping their children with homework projects, the seminars introduced parents to a range of resources and services they could use to help their children and included demonstrations of how to use the library catalogue and access information on the internet.

- A purpose-built library complex incorporating training rooms and other facilities to assist people to more actively engage in life-long learning activities within the library environment is proposed for Greater Dandenong by 2015.
- In 2003 Noosa Library received a Queensland state government innovation grant for a Learn to drive project. This involved the establishment of a car simulator in the library, storytelling and workshops on road safety.
- A technology training centre has been established at Auburn Library to allow clients to experience working with new software and to develop computer skills.
- An Indigenous Gathering Place has been opened in Maribyrnong Library to provide a number of programs, including mental health and cultural programs, for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.
- Late in 2003 the Age Public Library within the Hume Global Learning Centre, began developing a teacher training program to upskill teachers in the use of media and current events in curriculum contexts.
- The State Library of South Australia offers a Family History training course which introduces clients to genealogical searching and in more advanced classes teaches participants how to care for documents so that they can be preserved with minimal deterioration.
- Health on the internet is one of a series of seminars on health offered by Chermshire Library in 2004. It offered information on searching some of the available health databases and websites.