



Australian Library and
Information Association

Submission in response to the Senate Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy Discussion Paper

30 September 2019

1. About us

ALIA

The Australian Library and Information Association is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. On behalf of our 5,000 personal and institutional members, we provide 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.

National, State and Territory Libraries

There are nine National, State and Territory Libraries, located in capital cities around Australia, attracting more than 9.5 million visitors each year, and holding collections valued at \$4.1 billion.¹ Many of these libraries are important civic buildings, providing a focal point for the city as well as access to documentary heritage. At the same time, they have a high-profile online presence, with more than 47 million visits to their websites per annum, including visits to Trove, the National Library of Australia's platform containing a wealth of newspaper articles, journals, books, images and other cultural assets.²

Australia's public library network

Australia has more than 1600 central, branch and mobile libraries, with 9.3 million registered members and more than 114 million customer visits each year. Offering books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, wifi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, they are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource. In 2016-2017, the number of public access internet devices provided by public libraries nationally grew to 13,531.³

¹ <https://www.nsla.org.au/index.php/about>

² <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>

³ https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/aust_pub_lib_stats_report_2016-17_final_8.pdf

Over the last 20 years, public libraries have increased their role in the digital space, enhancing people's online experiences, helping people connect to this new virtual world, and providing a safety net for those who are in danger of being left behind, particularly in terms of the ability to access government information.

Other libraries

In addition to our National, State, Territory and public libraries, there are approximately 9,400 school libraries, 2,000 special libraries (health, law, government, corporate, heritage, arts, media) and 450 university and TAFE libraries. All libraries contribute in some way to the development of an informed society and to citizens who can participate in public debate and decision-making.

2. How libraries support nationhood and national identity

Libraries provide equity of access to current and historic materials; to stories about Australia's first people and more recent arrivals, from the earliest times through to the present day. Our National, State and Territory libraries aim to be culturally safe places, respectfully and sensitively turning information relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander matters into a powerful resource for Indigenous people.

Through their extensive collections, libraries enable people to carry out their own research and access others' work; whether family historians, scholars or academics.

Libraries hold content in languages other than English, responding to the multicultural nature of our population. Through programs focused on harmony, mutual appreciation and understanding, libraries bring people from diverse backgrounds together to celebrate the different cultures that make up our society.

3. How libraries support democracy

With their established and trusted position in local communities, our National, State, Territory and public libraries are uniquely placed as government-funded entities to support public engagement and the democratic process.

ALIA's first Object is "To promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy, environment and democracy". The library sector embraces free speech and freedom of expression.

Libraries democratise information in the form of print and digital resources, and by responding to more than 8 million enquiries each year.

Literacy is an essential pre-requisite for engagement in the democratic process. Public libraries run open literacy sessions, from storytime for pre-schoolers through to classes for adults with low levels of reading and writing.

They provide high speed internet access for all, including those with limited connectivity at home or affordability issues. Public libraries also run programs to help those who lack the necessary digital skills become proficient internet users and stay safe online.

At the national and international level, libraries contribute to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Public access to information is a target within Goal 16 – peace, justice and strong institutions.

4. Responses to specific questions

Q What does a democratic culture look like and how can it be nurtured?

True democracy can only occur in a society where everyone has the opportunity to access information. This requires people to be literate, not only in the traditional skills of reading and writing, but also in terms of information literacy (to be able to know the difference between facts and fake news) and digital literacy (to be able to find authentic sources of quality information).

Democracy also requires people to have equity of access to information, free speech and freedom of expression, all values which libraries uphold. Libraries not only make their collections available to all, they also help people develop the skills they need to discover information which can often be life-changing.

By providing libraries with the support and funding they need to provide these services to our growing population, all three levels of government are working together to nurture people's ability to engage with democracy.

Q What does it mean to be an Australian? What constitutes the Australian nation?

Libraries' collections help people understand what it means to be Australian. Historic and contemporary materials explain how our nation has developed over time and with new waves of migration. This provides perspective for recent arrivals and helps deepen and diversify relationships between communities through improved understanding of each other's arts, culture and heritage.

Digital access to Australian collections, notably through the National Library of Australia's Trove platform⁴, ensures that our nation's content is widely available. Digital access helps promote our culture and heritage and ensures that Australian factual and creative output is not only available at home, but also on the world stage.

Q How can the Australian nation recognise its Indigenous cultures, peoples and history?

In common with galleries, archives and museums, libraries are working with elders and Indigenous communities to increase awareness of the richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, while respecting the sensitivities around of some elements of the collections.

⁴ <http://trove.nla.gov.au/>

Initiatives include moves to introduce item descriptions which better reflect Indigenous society than the Western cataloguing terms which have previously been used, and to decolonise collections, increasing the diversity of perspectives to include a greater emphasis on Indigenous voices.

Q How could a sense of shared civic community be encouraged for all Australians?

When people arrive in Australia, whether through choice or for reasons of hardship, as migrants, international students, refugees or humanitarian entrants, they seek to make a place for themselves and their families in their new communities. They have to set up home, find employment, become familiar with cultural norms that are second nature to Australians but alien to new arrivals, and often their first language is not English.

For library users, coming from a country where there is a good public library network, the local library is an obvious place to find essential information, sign up for English language conversation classes, use the public computers, engage with other children and families at storytime. Joining the library is part of the settling in process. For others, coming from countries where there may not be a library network, libraries are an unknown quantity and it can be hard to build up the courage to step over the threshold.

More than 9.3 million Australians are members of their local public libraries, representing one of the highest levels of voluntary civic participation across all ages and socio-economic tiers. Further investment would enable libraries to extend their reach, through collections, programs and services targeting those who are currently non-users – both new arrivals and citizens from hard-to-reach groups. Case studies of public library support for migrants and refugees were the subject of an ALIA report earlier in 2019.⁵

5. Summary

Libraries are well placed to contribute to the discussion around nationhood, national identity and democracy. With a well-funded National, State, Territory and public library network, people have a better understanding of what it is to be Australian; are better equipped to engage in the democratic process and are more likely to be engaged citizens. We ask for the important work of libraries in this arena to be acknowledged in the Committee's report.

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⁵ https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/2019%20Services%20for%20Migrants%20and%20Refugees_0.pdf