BREAKING THE CYCLE OF DISADVANTAGE

Submission to the Australian Social Inclusion Board
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

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1. BACKGROUND

1.1 About ALIA

ALIA is the peak body representing the library and information services sector. It represents 6000 members, the library and information profession, Australian library and information services, and the interests of over 12 million library users.

Library and information services professionals are committed to the following core values:

- Promotion of the free flow of information and ideas through open access to recorded knowledge, information, and creative works.

- Connection of people to ideas.

- Commitment to literacy, information literacy and learning.

- Respect for the diversity and individuality of all people.

- Preservation of the human record.

1.2 Public libraries at a glance...

- There are over 1500 public libraries across Australia and 8500 library staff, who provide expert guidance
- Almost ten million people or nearly 50% of the population are library members and many more use them as study spaces, for online research, or to browse the collections of books, CDs, DVDs, newspapers and magazines
- There are over 9 million visits to public libraries each month giving a total of almost 110 million annual visits
- Australians borrow more than 177 million items a year and make nearly 7 million enquiries
- There are 9400 PCs in our public libraries of which almost 8000 have internet access
- All this costs Australians $830 million—just over 10c a day each

Source: The Australian Public Libraries Statistical Report 2007-2008 (State Library of Queensland, September 2009)

1.3 Why people love libraries

Public libraries are community-owned spaces, providing a safe environment, where everyone is welcome and respected and no-one has to justify their presence. There are quiet areas for study, but there are also fun events and programs.

Libraries offer universal free access to information, knowledge and ideas, in a wide variety of formats, including traditional print material, online content and ebooks, and in many different languages. There is expert help on hand if it's needed and most of the services are free.

Public libraries support formal and informal learning, especially reading and literacy, through all stages of life. Very young children are given a better start in life through baby rhyme-time and story time sessions. Older children can take advantage of study space and homework clubs to improve their performance at school. There are classes for adults and opportunities to learn new skills at any age.

Job seekers find the resources they need to research vacancies and apply online; others use the internet to return information to government; for recreational pursuits, or to communicate with friends and family.

Public libraries are places where people can meet, share and be inspired by each other, for example through reading groups – and if people are unable to travel to their library, it can go to them through mobile libraries, the home library service, and the internet.

Most public libraries have a local history section and often there is a display charting the development of the community or some aspect of local heritage. These are places where cultural identity can be explored and diversity celebrated.

2. LITERACY AND READING

Literacy can mean the difference between educational success and failure; employment and unemployment; social inclusion and social exclusion. If you can't read, you can't function well in our society.

The need to improve literacy rates is widely recognised in Australia. It is evident in the range of policies and programs already implemented or proposed at a federal, state and local government level. Examples of recent Federal Government initiatives include the NAPLAN testing program and MySchool database; the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program; the Get Reading campaign; and National Literacy and Numeracy Week.

Public libraries play a vital role in putting books and other reading matter into the hands of the people who need it most. This is partly a function of affordability – book borrowing is free – but a further factor is the inventiveness and enthusiasm of the library staff in reaching out to their communities.

At the same time, teacher librarians in school libraries inspire and support literacy, making sure that every child is given the opportunity to find the book that is right for them – the right book, in the right hand, at the right time.

2.1 Why reading is important

At its most basic level, reading is a pleasurable pastime that has many positive outcomes for the individual. It provides inexpensive entertainment, contributes to a person's well being, and provides a connection with others. It is a means of acquiring knowledge and self development, enabling readers to understand and empathise with people of different eras, cultures and situations.[i]

Reading promotes literacy skills that are the foundation for lifelong learning and are a means to access education, employment opportunities and to achieve full participation in modern society.[ii]

The ability to read has never been so important, as society and its use of technology changes at an ever increasing pace. Reading has become a basic survival skill and little can be achieved without it.[iii]

2.2 The issue

Low socio-economic status affects literacy and numeracy. People from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to complete secondary education and undertake further education and more likely to be unemployed and face long term economic disadvantage.[iv] If there is not a reading culture in the home or at school, their children are likely to grow up with similar literacy issues and the cycle of disadvantage will perpetuate.

2.3 The opportunity to break the cycle

2.3.1 Promoting library membership

In the United States, the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP) report found that access to printed material was associated positively with test scores for a variety of subjects. Although the students' scores also rose successively with the parents' education, it was determined that the number of books a student had access to remained a predictor of better test scores.[v]

The NAEP conclusions were supported by a recent study, *Family scholarly cultures and education success,* which measured parents' scholarly culture by the number of books in the home and estimated the effect on children's education. The study analysed a number of international surveys into educational levels, but only included those that incorporated a question on home library size. They were able to analyse over 70,000 cases, with answers from 27 countries, including Australia, and found that large home libraries greatly enhance children's educational achievements. Even after other sources of influence on educational advantage such as parent's education, occupation or nationality were controlled, the effect of books in the home was still strong. Having books in the home has a greater impact on children in the most disadvantaged families. It is at the lower end of the scale, where books are scarce, that each additional book matters most.[vi]

By providing free access to a wide range of reading materials, our school and public libraries and other program initiatives encourage reading and positively influence the educational outcome for students of all ages from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.[vii]

A library membership campaign is being planned as part of the National Year of Reading 2012, with the aim of reaching those who would most benefit from library membership and the opportunity to have more books in the home.

2.3.2 Books from birth

It is widely accepted that the early years of a child's life are the most significant learning period. Research has shown that 75% of brain development occurs in the first three years of life. Early learning is central to ensuring all children achieve their potential. Reading to babies and young children has a significant effect on their literacy development. It helps in the development of pre-literacy skills that are needed to learn to read.[viii]

By the time children get to school, it is too late. Five-year-olds from homes with books, whose parents have read to them from birth, already have a significant learning advantage over those from homes without a reading culture. In fact, the critical period is from birth to three years of age.

There are excellent early literacy programs in some states, which have put books in the hands of babies and toddlers, and opened parents' eyes to the benefits of reading. However, provision across the nation is patchy. Simply by introducing a 'books from birth' program in Australia, similar to that developed in the UK, and adopted in Japan and New Zealand, the federal government could make a step-change in the literacy levels of future generations – this against a backdrop of research that shows that 46% of Australians aged 15-74 don't have the prose literacy skills they need to meet the everyday needs of life and work.[ix]

3. DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

Public libraries are the key providers of free internet access for many people who do not have access at home or through school and work. Over the last 10 years, there has been a huge increase in the usage of PCs in libraries and requests for library staff to assist with computing queries.

3.1 Why internet access is important

Technology is advancing rapidly and without access to computers and the internet, people are in danger of being left behind. Countries such as Finland and Estonia have already ruled that access to the internet is a human right.

According to the results of a global poll of nearly 28,000 adults, conducted across 26 countries for the BBC World Service, and published in March 2010, four out of five (79%) regard internet access as a fundamental right. People spoke of the importance of access to information, the greater freedom it brings and the opportunity to connect with others through social networks.

3.2 The issue

The provision of free internet access through PCs in public libraries is about building a fair Australia, where everyone has equal access to the valuable resources and opportunities provided through the worldwide web.

The lack of broadband access and affordable internet access remains a very significant issue in Australia – both for individuals and the libraries that support them. According to the *Australia's Digital Economy: Future Directions Final Report*:

Digital Engagement	Australia	United Kingdom	Canada
Households with home access to the internet (as a percentage of all households)	**64% (2007 data)**	67% (2007 data)	68% (a) (2006 data)
Number of broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2007	**23% (2007 data)**	26% (2007 data)	27% (c) (2007 data)
Business with their own website (as a percentage of businesses with 10 or more employees)	**55% (f) (2006 data)**	75% (g) (2007 data)	68% (2006 data)

3.3 The opportunity to break the cycle of disadvantage

3.3.1 National Broadband Network

The National Broadband Network represents a major commitment by the government that we hope will enable the majority of the population to overcome the barriers of lack of broadband access and affordable internet access.

There are already some 9400 PCs in public libraries, of which 7800 are connected to the internet. With further investment in library staff training to deliver the level of support required by users, public libraries have the potential to be a major partner in the roll out of the National Broadband Network.

3.3.2 Provision of electronic resources

90% of people surveyed for the BBC World Service poll (see 3.1) said the internet was a good place to learn. Access to quality content is an important factor in fulfilling the opportunities presented by the National Broadband Network.

However, access to electronic resources varies from library to library. There is no base level of provision of online databases, magazines, journals and so on, for every Australian. If this were in place, it would have the potential to provide those who live in rural and remote Australia with the same level of access to information as those who live in urban and metropolitan areas.

Electronic Resources Australia (ERA) was established in 2007 to negotiate with suppliers of online information for favourable terms for Australian libraries, establishing economies of

scale through a consortium approach. There is the opportunity for federal government to establish and fund a baseline of e-resources, available nationally through the public library system.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

ALIA recommends that the Social Inclusion Unit consider the following measures.

4.1   To address the issues around literacy:

Provide endorsement, support and funding for the National Year of Reading 2012, in particular for the library membership campaign

Work in partnership with libraries and early childhood practitioners to create a national early literacy initiative

4.2   To address the issue of fair and equitable internet access:

Make public libraries a major partner in the roll out of the National Broadband Network

Establish and fund a baseline of e-resources, delivered through the public library system

IN CONCLUSION

We appreciate the opportunity to submit our comments to the Social Inclusion Unit. More information can be found on our website www.alia.org.au and we would be happy to provide further details about any one of the topics discussed in this paper.

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