



Submission in response to the Australian Government Inquiry into Adult Literacy

March 2021

1. About us

Australian Library and Information Association

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) 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. ALIA is the peak body for public, school, university, TAFE and special libraries. We work closely with the Council of Australian University Librarians and National and State Libraries Australia.

ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance

The Australian Public Library Alliance is part of ALIA and represents the interests of the nation's 1500 public libraries. Offering books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, WiFi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, these libraries are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource.

- More than 9 million registered users in 2018-19 and more than 110 million visits to libraries, 51 million visits to library websites.
- More than 273,000 programs eg storytime, Be Connected, attracted over 7.4 million attendees.
- Per capita annual cost of \$52.38, funded by councils, state and territory governments.¹

Over the last 20 years, public libraries have increased their role in adult literacy and informal learning. For libraries, literacy includes reading and writing, media literacy and digital literacy. Library staff give people knowledge and tools to distinguish misinformation and fake news, and they enhance people's online experiences, helping library users connect to the 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 sites.

¹ <https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla-public-library-stats-2018-19.pdf>

2. Libraries bring lifelong learning to the people who need it most

There is a public library in most communities across Australia and each one demonstrates that there is not only a need for lifelong learning, there is also a keen appetite for it. Libraries run more than 270,000 programs each year, ranging from rhyme-time for toddlers to Tech Savvy Seniors classes for older Australians. Participants can build their own computer, learn coding and robotics, find out about keeping chickens in their backyard or how to research family histories, use a 3D printer, build new worlds with Minecraft – and much more. There are bi-lingual story-times for families whose first language isn't English; there are Deadly Digital sessions for Indigenous communities and there are English conversation classes for new arrivals. These courses are free at the point of delivery, putting them within the reach of everyone; unlike formal education, where increased costs have priced out of the market those who most need the support.

Library programs attract all ages and participation is driven by a number of factors. Literacy is at the core, whether it is introducing children to the joy of books, or helping adults pick up the reading ability they missed out on at school. For some, it's about updating or developing new skills, which will help them find employment or improve their career prospects. For others, it's about keeping their brain active post-retirement. Many turn to the library to help them stay on top of the new technologies, which are changing the world around them.

3. Libraries support adult literacy in its many forms

Libraries support the many different literacies including reading, writing, media literacy, STEM, financial and digital literacy. In January 2017, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning published a policy brief *Using Libraries To Support National Literacy Efforts*², which said:

'Used strategically, libraries have the potential to play a key role in promoting national literacy efforts, as they are trusted by people in the communities they serve and are in a good position to provide a wide variety of literacy opportunities. Libraries provide literacy resources for children, youth and adults at all proficiency levels, thereby making an enormous contribution to supporting a reading culture and the creation of a literate society. They are also an ideal community space for facilitating intergenerational and family learning'.

Public libraries in Australia provide informal learning opportunities, free, local, at convenient times, from entry level, in community languages, all designed around the needs of library users. A few examples:

- Tech Savvy Seniors³ is a Telstra program run to improve digital literacy skills for older members of the community, hosted by public libraries in NSW, QLD and Victoria.
- Be Connected⁴ is a national program, funded by the federal government, and delivered through libraries around Australia.

² https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246778_eng

³ <https://www.telstra.com.au/tech-savvy-seniors>

- Libraries Tasmania⁵ has 23 Literacy Coordinators located around the state, supported by 26TEN, Tasmania's strategy for adult literacy and numeracy.
- In 2015, the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria⁶ published *Reading for All: Adult Literacy*, with six recommendations in terms of strategy, service, partnerships, capacity building, representation and aggregation.
- Libraries ACT discovered a lack of literacy support for English speaking adults in Canberra and has developed a volunteer adult literacy program. This program matches a volunteer tutor with a literacy learner and targets links their literacy learning to their individual needs and motivations.

Literacies build on each other. Digital literacy relies on basic reading and writing skills; media literacy requires reading, writing and digital literacy. Someone may be a highly competent reader but struggle with IT devices and platforms. They may be digitally literate but not have the knowledge and experience to distinguish between genuine information and misinformation.

Libraries help people identify their gaps and put in place easy, convenient ways to gain the skills they need to navigate the digital environment – something which has become even more critical in this COVID-19 environment.

4. Libraries make the link between early literacy and family literacy

Research from around the world has shown that children who are encouraged towards a love of language, stories and books in their early years are more likely to do well at school and develop the literacies they need as adults.

Libraries provide free rhyme time and story times (often in community languages) which are open to all families. Not only does the child benefit from sharing rhymes, songs and stories – parents, grandparents and carers do too. We have found that for adults with low literacy, sharing books with children is a less confrontational way of building their own reading skills.

ALIA is a founder member of the coalition campaigning for a National Early Language and Literacy Strategy⁷, seeking government support to make early literacy a national priority.

5. Progressing this important agenda

In relation to the library activities described in this paper, we would like to see four inclusions in this Inquiry's final report:

1. For the Inquiry to acknowledge the important role of libraries in supporting informal lifelong learning and all forms of adult literacy; making explicit recognition of libraries' position in the adult learning landscape.

⁴ <https://beconnected.esafety.gov.au/>

⁵ <https://www.libraries.tas.gov.au/literacy/Pages/default.aspx>

⁶ <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Reading-and-literacy-for-all-adult-literacy.pdf>

⁷ <https://earlylanguageandliteracy.org.au/>

2. For the Inquiry to make the connection between early literacy and family literacy and recommend that government departments in the areas of education, health, social services and Indigenous affairs at federal, state and territory level, work with the National Early Language and Literacy Coalition, of which ALIA is a founder member, to develop a National Early Language and Literacy Strategy.
3. For the Inquiry to recommend that the Department of Education Skills and Employment act upon the current review of the National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults⁸ published in 2016 and now at the mid-point of its 10-year life.
4. For the Inquiry to recommend that the Australian Bureau of Statistics continue to measure adult literacy, based on the internationally supported study and specifically with greater depth in the Australian context, so that we can understand the impact of policies and programs.

We also support the submissions from Libraries ACT, Adult Learning Australia and the Australian Council for Adult Literacy.

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⁸ <https://www.dese.gov.au/skills-information-training-providers/national-foundation-skills-strategy-adults>