



A new National Cultural Policy: submission from the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)

Who we are

ALIA is the peak body and professional association for the library and information sector representing public, national, state and territory, school, academic and special libraries across Australia. *For this consultation ALIA can be classified as an Arts Peak Body.*

First Nations

Recent research into First Nations employees in Australian libraries by Dr Kirsten Thorpe¹ shows that First Nations workers enable and support a vibrant Australian library sector and are committed to driving change. First Nations workers reported concern about cultural safety, cultural load, low numbers of First Nations employees and lack of pathways, networking and leadership opportunities in the library sector. These concerns are a challenge to us all, including government.

ALIA is working with libraries to improve First Nations representation, leadership and networking opportunities, promote cultural training for staff and work on identification and correction of historical injustices in collections and metadata. Government could make a huge impact, in areas such as:

- Support, including scholarships, for First Nations people to undertake education and training to equip them with the skills to enter and progress in the library and information sector, and other related cultural jobs.
- Leadership programs to connect First Nations people working within the cultural sector and support them into Leadership roles.
- Resourcing for cultural institutions to undertake the work necessary to redress past injustices in collections
- Ongoing financial support for libraries with historically significant collections of First Nations material to ensure its preservation and, where culturally appropriate, its sharing through national infrastructure such as [Trove](#).
- Recognition of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)

It is critical for children and adults to see First Nations authors in their school library collection, or on the shelves of their local public library. There are opportunities for small grants to support First Nations creators working with libraries. For example a recent Australian government RISE grant allowed ALIA to partner with Magabala books to commission two titles for young children that will be part of the Online Storytime program, allowing them to be read to children unable to access a physical library building.

¹ Thorpe, K (2021) *National Survey on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment in Australian Libraries* Australian Library and Information Association



A place for every story

Libraries connect communities with Australian stories. In an era where overseas-based multinational firms are taking an ever-larger share of marketing and sales, libraries are a space where Australian writers and illustrators will always have prominence, and are essential for Australian authors' income. Libraries make Australian stories available to the whole community, by eliminating the cost barrier and ensuring accessible formats such as audio and large print, or translation, are available. Just as there is a place for every story, libraries make sure there is a story for everyone, no matter their circumstances.

School libraries play a particularly important role in supporting children to develop a life-long relationship with reading. A well-managed library collection is diverse and enticing. Teacher librarians provide whole-school leadership in literacy programs that foster reading culture. School libraries coordinate author talks and creative programs that engage children directly with artists. The slow demise of school libraries is a significant challenge for engaging children with literature and improving literacy levels. A government commitment to every child having access to a school library with qualified school library staff is a priority to ensure that all children are able to explore the work of Australian writers and illustrators and develop lifelong reading habits, which in turn will lead to a happier, healthier and more literate nation.²

The Centrality of the Artist

Authors and illustrators, and the book industry, have sometimes struggled to secure funding and support compared to other art forms. ALIA supports the call from Books Create Australia for a National Strategy or Framework providing a cohesive policy approach to secure ongoing funding for books and reading.

Artists rely on libraries for income, from book purchases through to fellowships, author talks, workshops and festivals. Australian authors and illustrators also receive a payment under the lending rights scheme when their books are in library collections being borrowed and enjoyed - often long after royalty payments have ceased. Authors and illustrators rely on these relatively stable payments to invest in new creation. The scheme is badly in need of a funding boost and update as it does not cover ebooks or audiobooks, despite these formats making up an increasing percentage of library collections. A funded extension to lending rights is supported by all members of Books Create Australia including the Australian Society of Authors.

Library jobs are arts sector jobs. Like many arts sector jobs, they are often financially undervalued, a pressure that is increased for First Nations and culturally diverse groups. The university and VET courses for library and information services have come under pressures in recent years, with many courses closing. The substantial price increase at university level under the previous government's job ready graduates program put library and information services out of reach for many potential students. Moving library courses to a lower fee band would support a more diverse library workforce and the library courses at university level.

² See "[Why Read](#)" from Books Create Australia for research into the benefits of reading



Strong Institutions

Libraries are a trusted part of cultural infrastructure. Library collections hold the stories of the country, and are an important resource for everyone, including researchers and artists. Technological advances and the collaboration of Australia's libraries have brought significant opportunities in resource sharing and discovery. Trove, hosted by the National Library of Australia, allows Australians to access everything from university special collections to public library local history collections and digitized newspapers. With more than 50,000 visits every day, Trove is a popular and trusted cultural resource. However aging infrastructure and short-term funding pose challenges for ongoing library infrastructure. There is an opportunity for government work with libraries to fund reliable, scalable national digital infrastructure that would support smaller arts organisations and individual creative workers across Australia.

Many partner libraries, from the largest institutions to smallest public libraries, are struggling for resources for conservation, description, digital preservation and safe storage of their collections. The recent floods have highlighted the precarity of some collections and the need for more support for disaster preparedness and recovery, the inclusion of cultural institutions in disaster and recovery plans and funds for the digitization, description and sharing of collections through Trove.

Reaching the audience

Just as theatres or pubs are the venues for actors and musicians, libraries are the venues for Australian authors, poets, illustrators, historians, visual artists and writers. Libraries provide collections, resources, and spaces for artists. In 2019-2020, despite COVID impact, 6.3 million people attended a program or event at their local public library, with more than 84 million physical visits, and 140 million loans. Millions more people attended events and accessed resources through school, academic, special and national, state and territory libraries, in person and online.

Libraries are one of the few physical public spaces that are open and accessible to all for free. They are a safe place to connect with the arts, they embrace diverse voices, are accessible online for people who cannot be there in person, and play an essential role in the national cultural ecosystem.

Connecting people with collections would be further facilitated with the passage of the Copyright Access Reforms. For more information please see ALIA's [Submission in response to the Exposure Draft Copyright Amendment \(Access Reform\) Bill 2021](#).

While more than 90% of Australians read a book last year, there is still work to be done to support Australian authors, publishers, booksellers and librarians to introduce people to the many benefits to be realised by developing a lifelong habit of reading. A national reading campaign is key to unlocking those benefits for all to make Australians happier, smarter and healthier.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission and the commitment to Australia's cultural sector. This is a public submission and can be attributed to Trish Hepworth, Director of Policy and Education, Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Trish.Hepworth@alia.org.au