

Submission from the library and information sector to the Department of Home Affairs Multicultural Framework Review



About us

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)

The Australian Library and Information Association is the national peak body and professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. ALIA's membership spans the breadth of the sector, from national, state and territory libraries through to public, educational, academic, government and special libraries and information services. ALIA provides the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation.

ALIA Multicultural

ALIA Multicultural is a special interest group that aims to facilitate networking, support, professional development, and resources for the library and information sector with a focus on culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. The group brings together professionals representing public, academic, health, academic and (vocational education and training (VET) libraries.

CAVAL

CAVAL was created in 1978 to promote cooperation between Victorian academic libraries to benefit its membership. Since then, CAVAL has evolved into a relevant and key driver in the global library environment, ever-expanding and diversifying. While members remain the core focus, our quality solutions and services benefit libraries and educational institutions throughout Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

Executive summary

The Australian library sector congratulates the Department of Home Affairs on their proactive approach to reviewing the government's approach to multiculturalism in Australia. The sector endorses the aim of supporting a cohesive and inclusive multicultural society that embraces all Australians and celebrates the richness and diversity of our multicultural society. The principles guiding the delivery of library and information services are aligned with this aim.

Libraries support multicultural communities through public library services as well as in educational settings and specialised information services. Public libraries are free, open to all, and have a footprint across Australia, including in outer metropolitan and regional areas. As places for people to gather, to find information, for recreation and learning, libraries provide physical and online spaces, programs and myriad resources that welcome and embrace the diverse communities that make up Australian society. Through these services, libraries serve as pillars of support and cultural enrichment for their communities and reflect libraries' commitment to creating welcoming and inclusive spaces that cater to their patrons' diverse needs and interests.

Libraries take seriously the responsibility of providing access to collections and resources in the format and languages in which people need or want to access them, and of providing places in which cultures and languages can be practised and shared.

Libraries are not simply buildings with books. They embody the spirit of inclusion and cohesion, where the diverse tapestry of Australia's multicultural society comes together to create a stronger, more united community. Libraries understand how important visibility is, and how powerful it is to see oneself in stories, on screens, and in workplaces and professional roles. [ALIA's Professional Pathways initiative](#) is committed to supporting a diverse, skilled workforce that meets the needs of the future, which includes creating a workforce that is more representative of the diversity of the communities served.

The work of libraries has not been adequately reflected in national-level policies to date or received significant support from federal government, despite the important services offered, the essential role they play in multicultural communities and the opportunities to leverage existing work and structures to support further programs and initiatives.

This submission outlines the role that libraries play supporting multicultural communities to ensure that they are visible and understood in further policy development. The submission is structured in the following sections: collections, cultural and language programs, community needs, belonging and outreach, technology and digital citizenship, and workforce and skills. We look forward to opportunities to continue discussions with the Department of Home Affairs on how we can work together to ensure that libraries and information services support, celebrate, and reflect the diversity of voices and experiences in this country.

Collections: books, magazines, films, e-resources, and more

All members of the Australian community should have access to information and culture which meet their needs, regardless of their language, cultural background or country of origin. Collections are at the heart of library work and libraries strive to reflect the multicultural nature of Australian society in their collections.

Language is directly linked to culture, and ensuring communities can get access to resources from the country of origin is fundamental. Moses Abelian, the [United Nations Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, and United Nations Coordinator for Multilingualism](#), stated that 'cultures find expression through languages, and they feed languages, nourishing and enriching them. If there is no language in which to receive, transmit or express a culture, there is no culture.'

Access to print material in languages other than English (LOTE) in Australian libraries has an essential role in providing communities with a sense of belonging, of being welcomed and in being able to engage with their roots and new community in an open-minded and inclusive way. Libraries' work to diversify their collections to cater to their patrons' interests and backgrounds extends across collection materials; books, ebooks, magazines, films, music, graphic novels, digital resources, and many other materials. This enables libraries to better represent and serve different multicultural communities in the formats most relevant to community members.

For example children whose parents speak a second language are often not exposed to this language outside of the home environment and public libraries have seen a marked increased demand in bilingual picture books. These resources give the opportunity to engage with the language and culture of origin in an intergenerational and reciprocal way. The grand-parents' or parents' knowledge of English may be improved through bilingual books while the child's reading and writing knowledge in their native language is supported.

Demand for different resources changes with circumstance. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the proportion of digital resources being borrowed increased dramatically, For example,

Merri-bek library service in Victoria saw a four-fold increase in demand for LOTE e-resources during Covid, with variations across different language groups. Now that the country is in recovery mode, borrowing and demand for physical items are increasing again.

Along with physical and ebooks, there is a demand also for audio and audio visual LOTE collections. For libraries purchasing low numbers of titles across language groups, barriers to purchasing non-classified LOTE films have severely restricted the range of titles able to be offered. The library sector congratulates the Federal government for the [recent amendments](#) to the Classification Act to expand exemptions for low risk LOTE films in libraries that will address this challenge, and increase LOTE titles available in public libraries.

Welcome as the legal reforms are, there are still substantial challenges for public and other libraries in providing adequate LOTE collections. Budgets for maintaining, improving and expanding LOTE collections, especially for emerging language communities, are inadequate, compounded by purchasing and accessioning costs higher than English language equivalents. Some language groups are easier to acquire resources in, and libraries are doing well in collecting for those groups. There are groups for whom libraries are struggling to acquire adequate resources at any price, for example in Urdu and languages for which resourcing is almost impossible, for example in Khmer.

Libraries also face challenges ensuring the visibility of the existing collections and ensuring that communities are aware of the libraries' offerings. Some communities are not aware that there are books available in community languages at their local library or/and how to request them.

Cultural and language programs

Libraries have become vibrant hubs for cultural and linguistic exchange and celebration, with programs that feature food, cultural celebrations, traditions, and events where people from different backgrounds gather to learn about culture and share stories, food and experience. Such events educate and foster connections, respect, and understanding among diverse community members. Talks by and about multicultural authors give different perspectives on the creative richness of diverse Australia. A recent example was the exhibition and artist talk held by the Inner West City Libraries (NSW) about Antigone Kefala, an Australian poet of Greek-Romanian heritage. This is just one example of the ways that libraries highlight and celebrate the creative communities of migrant authors and poets whose work voices the rich experiences of migrants in this country.

Libraries also offer language programming through LOTE [storytime sessions](#) and [reading clubs for children](#), building ways to keep the connection with their parents' language, and for those parents to meet other parents who speak the same language. These are particularly important events for many migrant grandparents, who utilise these sessions to meet and socialise with other seniors from their cultural and language backgrounds. Libraries provide community language collections that cater to language learners, for example, children's books in languages, language learning manuals and materials, digital language learning resources (e.g. [Mango](#)). These collections support younger Australians to stay connected to their culture and heritage. Libraries also support community language schools through bulk loan delivery, which can be essential for emerging language communities. While these programs and resources are highly appreciated, they are often underfunded.

A reciprocal element of language resourcing and programming offered by libraries is providing opportunities to learn other languages and to engage with different cultures for those in Australia. An ALIA Multicultural member, who came to Australia from overseas, had

a particularly inspiring experience being introduced to the Sinhala language and culture, through getting to know a colleague. Learning Sinhala language and script was a linguistic endeavour and a profound cultural exploration, opening new doors of understanding and appreciation for a culture that was previously unfamiliar. This experience highlights libraries' incredible potential for fostering cultural exchange and learning.

A further element to language resourcing and programs offered by libraries is instruction in English. Competency in English is essential for integration, social connection and access to services in Australia, and low levels of English puts those people at a significant social and economic disadvantage. Libraries can and do play an important role in assisting all Australians to achieve competency in English whether as a first or second language, such as through [language cafes or targeted International English Language Testing System \(IELTS\) preparation](#).

There is substantial need, and opportunity for federal government investment in order to keep these services available and extend them to all those who require them. By expanding and improving multicultural and language programs and services, libraries can continue to catalyse cultural exploration, understanding, and unity within our diverse Australian society.

Community needs

Different communities have different needs from their libraries; there is no single homogenous multicultural group. Varied needs can be hard to resource equitably. For example, new arrivals to Australia may be educated professional migrants, arrive as asylum seekers, or arrive never having learnt to read in their mother tongue. For the latter group, audiobooks can be hugely valuable for non-print reading patrons to have access to materials in a way they understand.

Libraries are committed to providing resources to communities at all stages of life. As multicultural communities get older their needs change. For example public libraries are seeing a growing demand for resources for older community members from non-English speaking backgrounds such as larger print and bold type books and easily magnified e-resources.

Aging happens to all communities and many libraries provide programs for people living with dementia or Alzheimer's disease. One library service in Melbourne partnered with an aged care centre to host a poetry and reminiscence program in different languages. Facilitators reported one participant who had not acknowledged or recognised other people for many years, who was sparked to talk again when she heard poetry that she recognised.

While all public libraries provide learning materials for English as a second language (ESL), which can be very important for some migrants who do not have regular access to formal English language education, library budgets are often too constrained to offer good variety, and choice can often be limited or age-inappropriate.

Many TAFE, university and public libraries offer services to patrons and communities who are seeking employment. [Greater Dandenong Libraries](#) run a Library Help for Adults services program that includes [support for adults to get job ready with CV reviews and job application](#) assistance. The service is booked out months in advance, and a high proportion of those who access the service speak English as a second language or were not born in Australia. The demand for this program indicates the need and value of informal employment and literacy support, and that public libraries are well placed to provide it. To meet demands, this service and others like it are in need of greater, ongoing funding to embed adequate levels of skilled staff to support people on their journey to meaningful employment.

These programs and partnerships with community organisations often rely on sporadic program-specific funding and are small scale and local. There is also an opportunity to support the sharing of successes and lessons to scale up these localised efforts. Extending these highly impactful programs equitably to Australia's diverse multicultural and multilingual communities requires adequate ongoing funding and a skilled, diverse workforce.

Belonging and outreach

Libraries actively seek collaborative partnerships with local cultural and community groups. These partnerships amplify the impact of multicultural programs and services by tapping into existing cultural networks and expertise and can develop a sense of belonging, connection and place.

One successful example of this is [Yarra Plenty Regional Library's program Talking Together](#), which aimed to build trust with the local Somali Australian community in Melbourne's north. The initiative built trust through a co-design practice and resulted in the recruitment of two project officers from the Somali Australian community to identify the needs of the community. The project is encouraging many more community members to come into and use library services. Pursuing the program was made possible through a grant received from the State Library of Victoria, highlighting the precarity of many important programs and the importance of ongoing funding.

The suburb of Fawkner has one of the fastest growing Muslim communities in Naarm /Melbourne and Urdu is the third most common language spoken at home. A significant proportion of Urdu-speaking women from Pakistan are highly educated, but face difficulty finding employment in Australia due to barriers in getting qualifications accredited, among other factors. Merri-bek library service partnered with [Merri Health](#) to identify the community, cultural and information needs of the Urdu women in the area. They found that the sense of isolation was high and was negatively impacting integration and connection. Together they began meeting with the Urdu women in the community hall, as there was reluctance to come to the library, as libraries are not free in Pakistan. Library staff shared information about the library and the services and resources offered there, free of charge. The library was opened before usual opening hours for the women and their children to explore the library and participate in storytime sessions ahead of the crowds. This quickly grew a sense of trust, confidence and belonging in the library, and eventually the women decided to join the main storytime sessions.

Libraries collaborate with health organisations and other partners to develop programs to support people from all cultural and linguistic backgrounds experiencing family and domestic violence. These programs build connections and strength, linking people to relevant legal, health and financial organisations in the space, and support women into work and to connect with other women. They have significant positive impact, and are most often made possible by applying to one-off funding streams. The success of these programs also relies on strong relationships with community connectors, multilingual individuals employed by councils who provide essential communication channels between communities and council services, such as libraries.

These initiatives demonstrate the power of community partnerships and outreach to make connections with minority or CALD communities, to understand their perceptions of the library, their information and cultural needs, and then develop relationships and services that are truly life changing, not only in people's personal lives, but in their support for all Australians to play an active part and contribute to society. They also indicate the amount of work and dedication these initiatives require from devoted, skilled staff.

In TAFE libraries, there have been fewer international students due to the Covid-19 lockdowns. However, this cohort tends to come to the library as a first port of call for all kinds of issues they may be facing because the library has successfully created a welcoming, safe place where good information can reliably be found. Lack of resourcing limits the kinds of programming TAFE libraries can offer, despite the multitude of opportunities to engage more international students and support their studies and wellbeing.

Creating local history collections is a growth area for many local organisations. However, migrant stories, voices and stories have often been absent from these initiatives. These stories are an essential part of the rich weave and narrative of Australia's past, present and future. One example of a local history initiative is [WikiNorthia](#), an online encyclopedia designed to document life in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne. It is a joint project of Darebin, Merri-bek, and Yarra Plenty Regional Libraries, with funding secured from the Library Board of Victoria for the project. People across five local councils with rich cultural histories and diverse communities are encouraged to get together and tell their stories providing a snapshot of life in the north of Melbourne now and in the past. The generation and preservation of this information will have lasting benefit to the community and showcase low-cost, community generated ways for the collection of stories that reflect the experiences and perceptions of all communities in the area.

There are many stories and records already held by collecting institutions, however, their access and visibility can be problematic. The National Archives of Australia's [Immigration Photographic Archive](#) is an excellent initiative designed to collect the stories of Australia's vast immigrant communities. However, of the 10,000 photographs that have been digitised and described so far, there is a skew towards immigrants of English-speaking backgrounds. This risks continuing to silence the stories from Australia's multicultural communities. Similarly, while Trove has done excellent work to digitise journals and newspapers in diverse languages, the quality of optical characters recognition (OCR) is lower for languages in scripts other than Latin script. This impacts the accessibility of multicultural communities to the information that connects them to their past and heritage.

Representative collecting has major implications for future academic research into Australian society and culture, and the communities and ethnic minorities that make up Australian society. Libraries need adequate resourcing to acquire and preserve material by and about these groups and from appropriate countries and in the appropriate languages.

Technology and digital citizenship

The ability to take part fully in civic life and in the democratic process is directly linked to digital and media literacy, and we know that competency and confidence in this area is far from equal. [Recent reports indicate](#) that those groups already facing disadvantage, including CALD communities, are those who need the most support in media and digital literacy. Access to technology is essential for anyone arriving in Australia in order to have access to vital services, information and to communicate with friends and family. However, we know that [many new arrivals are left behind when it comes to digital inclusion](#).

Recognising the importance of technology in today's society, libraries provide valuable access to devices, wi-fi, and digital resources and digital skills. Access to technology and digital resources, and to support in using them, are essential for people from all backgrounds. However people from diverse communities and cultural backgrounds and languages have different needs in terms of resources and support, whether this is to access visa or citizenship information, to connect with their home countries, or improve their digital literacy skills. Demand for media literacy support has been increasing among many public library communities, indicating that people need support not only with how to use devices,

but also in the kinds of information streams coming in through them, including around the increase in mis and disinformation.

Increasingly health, civic, education and other services are accessed uniquely through apps or online, which has a major impact for those left on the other side of the digital divide. Libraries are often the only place people are able to turn to for help. Greater Dandenong's Adult Help for Libraries service supports the community with Australian citizenship sessions to provide information to people navigating e-gov form filling, sponsorship and assistance with finding supporting English classes.

As mentioned earlier, audio books and e-resources are crucial for equitable access to resources, with some community members unable to read, or having lost their sight. Libraries need greater resourcing to lend out devices as well as instruct people in how to use devices safely.

Workforce and skills

The value of diverse, representative workforces is increasingly understood and recognised at all levels of employment. In the library and information sector, we are increasingly aware that ensuring leadership and decision-making roles are diverse and inclusive, reflecting the community they serve, will help make informed decisions about multicultural programs and services. ALIA is currently pursuing the [Professional Pathways initiative](#), a four-year workforce redevelopment project that seeks to develop a library and information workforce that anticipates and meets the needs of the population. Key to this initiative is the recognition that future quality library services will rely on a diverse, skilled workforce that is valued and supported.

We know that pathways to leadership are much more difficult for people from different backgrounds in Australia. A [study by Monash University](#) confirmed the presence of embedded discrimination based on the names of applicants, particularly in recruitment for leadership positions. Over 12,000 applications were sent to some 4,000 advertisements in which the only differences were in the names of the applicants. Ethnic sounding names received 57% fewer callbacks, revealing the glass ceilings present in leadership employment.

The varied and diverse skills of people in the library and information sector are crucial to providing collections, services and programs to welcome and support all communities. Many libraries employ multilingual staff members, who play a pivotal role in creating an inclusive atmosphere and creating appropriate services. These staff members can communicate effectively with patrons in their preferred languages, offering personalised assistance and bridging communication gaps.

In educational setting, such as TAFE libraries, multilingual staff members who speak a second language are able to help many international students navigate the library, its resources, and IT issues. In Merri-bek council, position descriptions have been advertised with Arabic skills as required, again indicating the value of multilingualism.

Cataloguing books in foreign languages requires an unusual set of skills that combine technical cataloguing knowledge with language expertise. Quality cataloguing is essential to ensure the discoverability of the books in the library, both by library staff and patrons. In Victoria, a successful program operated, first under the library council of Victoria and then under the State Library Victoria which subsidised the cost of providing catalogue records for LOTE materials. When this program concluded the full cost of cataloguing these materials was passed through to libraries, increasing the cost of LOTE materials. A similar scheme at

national level would reduce the cost barriers of LOTE materials for libraries, increasing the amount of materials that could be purchased with LOTE material budgets.

We would like to conclude this submission with a personal story from Ying, who now works in the library sector.

When Ying first arrived in Australia, she found herself in a situation familiar to many newcomers: precarious living arrangements and navigating the complexities of settling in a new country. During those uncertain days, her local council library was a beacon of hope. The library offered much more than just books and resources. It provided a safe and welcoming space where she could access wi-fi, use public computers to communicate with family and friends back home and find a peaceful spot to read and gather her thoughts. It was here, in the heart of her new community, that she began to feel a sense of stability and connection.

This personal story highlights libraries' critical role in offering practical assistance, psychological refuge and intellectual stimulation to those in need, irrespective of their background or circumstances. Libraries are not merely repositories of knowledge, they are vibrant hubs of inclusivity and support where people from all walks of life access essential resources, engage with the community, and build the foundation for a better future.

The value of libraries in supporting Australia's multicultural society is in the way library professionals seek to understand and strategically respond to the particular information and service needs of its community, and by the extent to which the services it provides have an impact on users' knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours and enable communities to be more inclusive, creative, and find a sense of belonging.