



Australian and
Association



23 May 2024

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

Re: Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia

To strengthen our democratic and electoral systems, Australian libraries provide:

- Resources to facilitate equitable access to information for all Australians, regardless of age, race, gender identity, religion, ability, or geographic location.
- Collections and preservation of government records for government transparency and electoral knowledge.
- Trained staff to develop skills in information literacy, digital literacy, and media literacy.
- Safe spaces for civics dialogue and social cohesion in a pluralistic society.

Resources to facilitate equitable access to information.

As Australian information about democracy, electoral events, and voting moves increasingly into online formats, equitable access to technology become an essential mechanism for civic engagement. Libraries are trusted institutions that provide free access to wifi and public access terminals. Australia's 1700+ public library service points act as information sources and community hubs across the country. Even across the COVID-impacted years of 2020-2021, 50 million visits were made to libraries, and close to 150 million items were borrowed or accessed, making them one of Australia's most popular public institutions to seek and receive information³.

In 2021-2022, the National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) reported that public libraries in Australia provided approximately 14,250 public access terminals for communities across every state. Additionally, many library visitors are now using their own laptops, tablets, smartphones and e-readers within libraries. In the same period, there were 8.59 million wifi logins at public libraries. In one year, the Australian public spent 6.59 million hours online at their public library.⁴

Libraries are also providing access to and preserving diverse collections that allow every Australian to access and understand our rich political, cultural, and socio-economic history. Our national, state, and territory libraries have a legal mandate to collect and preserve all materials published in their jurisdiction, including government materials. These government resources support a deep understanding of political and electoral history and provide a foundation for informed and active citizenry. Special collections in academic and specialist libraries preserve and make available archival records from key figures, times and movements. As well as being invaluable for research, these programs form the basis of civic and other educational programs.

Recommendations:

³ NSLA, *Australian public libraries statistical report, 2021-2022*. <https://www.nsla.org.au/wp-content/uploads/PLS-2021-22-final.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.



- Federal Government funds initiatives in libraries to support digitally inclusive communities, including through collaboration with ALIA.
- Federal Government Departments work collaboratively with ALIA to support Australia’s libraries and ensure all Australians can access quality public library collections.

Trained staff to increase skills in information literacy, digital literacy, and media literacy.

Beyond access to information, the ability to assess the legitimacy of information – to be “information literate” – is critical to an informed citizenry, particularly given the rise of mis- and disinformation. Information literacy and digital literacy have become core components of professional library services, as library staff in schools, universities, and public libraries are providing training to Australians young and old on e-safety and recognising mis- and disinformation. Connected to information and digital literacies, is the support libraries are providing around media literacy. ALIA recently contributed to the Australian Media Literacy Alliance (AMLA) submissions to the News Media Assistance program and to this inquiry, and endorses both submissions.⁵

Teacher librarians in schools have responsibility for whole school information literacy programs with a focus on the Australian Curriculum ‘General Capabilities’ of critical and creative thinking, digital literacy, ethical understanding, intercultural understanding, literacy, numeracy, and personal and social capability.⁶ The decline, particularly prevalent in public schools in some states and territories, of qualified school library staff, especially teacher librarians, places students in these schools at risk of significant disadvantage in obtaining the necessary information and media literacy skills. This threatens a growing divide between schools who are well resourced and those where students have less support.

Library staff are working to stay on top of the fast pace of change in the news media environment. This can include changes in information sources and platforms, for example needing to understand platforms such as TikTok or Instagram and changing concepts of “news”.⁷ The rise of generative AI tools, concerns about turbocharged mis and disinformation campaigns, and continued opacity of the algorithms that mediate consumer’s news consumption highlight the broad landscape library staff need to be familiar with to be able to support library users.

ALIA has seen success in programs where we have worked directly with researchers to examine needs, develop evidence-based approaches, apply these in a library setting and evaluate outcomes. An example pilot program with researchers from the University of Canberra led to the development of a library-focused media literacy short course that focused on the skills that library

⁵ ALIA: *Submission to the News Media Assistance Program Consultation*, 2024.

<https://read.alia.org.au/file/2244/download?token=MXqJm942>

⁶ Australian Curriculum (n.d.) General Capabilities 9.0 Digital Literacy.

<https://v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/digital-literacy?element=0&subelement=0>

⁷ Notley, T., Chambers, S., Zhong, H.F., Park, S., Lee, J. Y., & Dezuanni, M. (2023) [News and Young Australians in 2023: How Children and Teens Access, Perceive and are Affected by News Media](#). Western Sydney University.



staff needed to support and teach media literacy with library users. The course evaluations showed that 94% of participants developed new skills sets and would recommend the course to colleagues.⁸

ALIA is also a partner in the ARC funded *Addressing Misinformation through Media Literacy through Cultural Institutions* and has just started another pilot research program with UTS examining the way that generative AI tools affect library users seeking information. This project will develop a range of resources including a library curriculum and public exhibition exploring the findings. , Government support to roll out these programs at a national level would support Australians with critical information and media literacy skills throughout life.

Recommendations:

- The Federal Government commit to every Australian school student having access to a well-resourced school library run by qualified staff.
- The Federal Government work with the Australian Media Literacy Alliance (AMLA) to develop and implement a national media literacy strategy.
- The Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development, Transport, Communications and the Arts and the Department of Home Affairs work with AMLA and ALIA to support capacity building for public libraries and public library staff in the areas of information, media and digital literacy.
- The Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development, Transport, Communications and the Arts works with ALIA on a small grants scheme for libraries to support media and information literacy education.

Safe spaces for civics dialogue and social cohesion.

In 2017, Adam Selinger, Executive Director of the Children’s Discovery Museum stated, “Libraries are arguably the single most important grass-roots community space with capacity to provide ALL members of their community access to current knowledge and information. They can provide internet-enabled computers and tablets, collaborative working spaces, themed activities and programs targeting different audiences and acquire new resources to add to their borrowing collections.”⁹

While it’s been convenient for some to describe libraries as “neutral spaces”, in fact, libraries support plurality not neutrality. ALIA and Australian libraries continue to advocate to protect access to information, free from censorship and ensure that library collection decisions are based on professional considerations (e.g., quality, currency, format, etc.), rather than political, religious, or cultural prejudices. By developing and managing representative collections and spaces for all members of their communities, libraries reinforce the value of diverse opinions and an open and tolerant society.

⁸ Park, S., Walsh, B. & Su, J. (2023). *Libraries and Media Literacy Education*. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre

⁹ ALIA, *Australian libraries: the digital economy within everyone’s reach*, November 2017. <https://read.alia.org.au/file/587/download?token=WS8SwenZ>



One of the essential operational components of a contemporary public library is *Informed Connected Citizens*.¹⁰ Nationally, public libraries are places where people come together to connect with one another and with what is happening in their community, to find out about government programs and services, to learn about the community, local news and current events, to discuss community issues, to share and exchange opinions, and to learn about local laws and regulations to become involved in the democratic process.

As public institutions supporting social cohesion in a pluralistic society, public libraries across Australia have a proven track record of supporting diverse, relevant, and appropriate access to information about Australian democracy. In 2016, ALIA partnered with Australian Electoral Commission to coordinate the delivery of grant-funded community electoral information sessions around the nation in the lead-up to the federal election¹¹. Public libraries delivered 116 sessions at 64 library locations in ACT, NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia. In addition to English, sessions were delivered in 13 community languages: Gujarati, Farsi, Swahili, Cantonese, Dinka, Hindi, Arabic, Somali, Mandarin, Dari, Vietnamese, Spanish and Turkish. These kinds of programs can be refined and expanded to reach more Australians. More can be done to strengthen and promote partnerships between local and national governments and libraries to grow and deliver similar programs.

Recommendation:

- The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) should work with ALIA on a program of small grants to libraries that deliver electoral information and participation sessions.

Thank you for considering Australian libraries' exceptional contributions to a strong and resilient democracy and our need for increased funding, partnership, and advocacy to protect and expand the resources and services our libraries provide. I am happy to provide more information to support this inquiry.

Please don't hesitate to contact me [REDACTED] for any further information or discussion.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Zola Maddison,
Director of Training and Events,
ALIA

¹⁰ *APLA-ALIA Standards and Guidelines for Australian Public Libraries*, 2021.

<https://read.alia.org.au/file/1708/download?token=5xFrREhj>

¹¹ ALIA INCITE, *Libraries Promote the Importance of Voting*, September/October 2016.

<https://www8.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/inCiteALIA/2016/103.pdf>

