ALIA submission in response to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census consultation

April 2018

1. About ALIA

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the professional organisation and peak body 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. We represent school, public, academic, research, corporate, law, health, government, National, State and Territory libraries and the people who staff them.

Public libraries
Australia has more than 1500 central, branch and mobile libraries, with 9.3 million registered members and more than 113 million customer visits each year. Offering books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, wifi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, they are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource. Families with young children are an important audience and there are some 121,000 storytimes held each year, with more than 3.1 million participants.

The public library sector within ALIA is represented by the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance.

2. Libraries and the Census

Libraries are trusted places, promoting equity and freedom of access to information and resources. Public libraries are often the conduit between the public and government information. Each year, public libraries are dealing with more and more enquiries. In 2015-2016[1], more than 8.3 million reference transactions and information requests were recorded. The majority of these enquiries related to government information.

Public libraries can play an important role in communicating Census information to the wider Australian community. Through our network of public libraries, we have more than 1600 "shop windows" in communities across metro, regional and remote parts of Australia.

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[1] https://www.nsla.org.au/publication/australian-public-libraries-statistics-2015-2016

This opportunity was recognised in 2016, for example, by the ABS in Tasmania:

> *In 2016, the Australian Bureau of Statistics partnered with LINC Tasmania to make the 2016 Census more accessible to those with low literacy or barriers to online access. The extensive network of LINCs (libraries) were places where Tasmanians could find help accessing the Census online or in paper form, or for additional support including literacy. The partnership demonstrated the library's role in promoting social inclusion and enabling and supporting digital citizenship in an increasingly digital world, while generating higher quality Census data for Tasmania.*

3. Libraries and digital inclusion

According to 2015 figures from Telstra[2], one in five Australians was not online; four in 10 of the lowest income households in Australia were not connected to the internet, and of people aged 65 or more, only 46% were internet users. While these figures have improved, it still means that a significant proportion of the population is digitally excluded.

Over the last 20 years, public libraries have increased their role in the digital space, enhancing people's online experiences, helping people connect to this new 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 information.

Public libraries provide:

- Support for safe online experiences
- High speed broadband internet connection in a safe, friendly community space.
- PC terminals, tablets and other devices (including technology petting zoos)[3]
- Spaces for exploring innovative digital technologies
- Training and informal help for people to develop digital literacy skills
- Relevant and engaging content.

On behalf of libraries, ALIA became one of the first members of the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance when it launched in August 2017.

The Australian Government has recognised the challenges of equity of access to information and services delivered online, and efforts are being made through libraries to address disadvantage and target groups who are less likely to be digitally engaged. Two examples are:

> *Be Connected is a substantial initiative designed to promote digital literacy for older Australians. ALIA is working with the Department of Social Services, the*

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[2] http://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/the-index-report/the-discussion-paper/

[3] Australia's 1486 central, branch and mobile libraries (2015-2016 figures) provide 12,806 devices with internet connection.

Office of the eSafety Commissioner, the Be Connected National Network Manager (the Good Things Foundation), and libraries across Australia to support digital inclusion programs in local communities.

The State Library of Queensland has introduced the Deadly Digital Communities program. The program provides community-based digital literacy and technology training over two years to 26 remote and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Queensland. Participants will learn digital skills from sending an email, to using social media, to paying bills online, to promoting a new business idea and more.

The first Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) was released in 2016, as a joint venture between Telstra, RMIT University and the Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne, powered by Roy Morgan Research (ALIA has a place on the Research Advisory Committee). The ADII identified the barriers to digital inclusion and the impact on communities. As described in the ADII 2017[4], digital inclusion in Australia is growing, but gaps between digitally included and excluded Australians are substantial and widening. The ACT has the highest ADII score at 59.9, while Tasmania has the lowest at 49.7.

Against this background, public libraries provide a valuable option for people who would otherwise be unable to complete the Census online,

6. Recommendation

Public libraries can be a major asset to the ABS if given advance notice and engaged in early discussions; without this, we are unable to provide the information and reassurance library users seek.

We ask for the role of libraries as supporters, facilitators and advocates for the Census to be articulated and acknowledged, opening the way for active partnerships with the ABS.

Our recommendation is that the ABS enter into discussions with the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance about a funded education and communications plan for 2021 Census, which explicitly articulates the role of public libraries and allows for information sessions, factsheets, FAQs and handouts to be provided well in advance of any public-facing campaign.

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[4] https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/