

# Libraries and life-long learning



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In their submission to the 1991 Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training inquiry on adult education, prepared on behalf of the Association, Di Booker and John Levett point out that information is one of the crucial ingredients in life-long learning and that reading is the most basic information-handling skill.

Libraries, particularly school and public libraries, have long held a position within the community as active providers of resources and services which enhance reading, literacy and other life-long learning skills. Their achievements have been largely self-generated, underpinned by professional commitment. As the two most recent national inquiries into adult education attest, libraries have gained little benefit from government resources for funding literacy programs.

The 1991 inquiry by the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, which produced the report *Come in Cinderella: the emergence of adult and community education*, was the first inquiry into adult education since the 1944 report by WGK Duncan for the Universities Commission. Before 1944, much adult education, and to a large degree public library services, had operated through community organisations like Mechanics Institutes and Schools of Arts. Coincidentally, as state governments were progressively assuming some responsibility for free public library services, they were also expanding their role as providers and administrators of adult education. The Duncan report stressed the importance of new skills and 'education for change' to enable reconstruction of the economy, words familiar to us still as governments continue to strive for a 'clever country' and build programs which emphasise the importance of life-long learning in the development of the necessary skills base.

The *Cinderella* report warns against a too simplistic correlation between the lack of literacy skills and unemployment, with the provision of labour market training programs seen as a solution. The Committee argues throughout the report that the pursuit of politically desirable results often leads to the construction of programs inappropriate to the client group. There are those, it claims, who will never acquire or improve literacy (including numeracy)

skills through basic adult education programs and labour market training programs; and that 'for an advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is an active literacy which allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, in order to participate effectively in society.' (p90) Though access to resources which enable life-long learning is considered important, the role of libraries is only briefly mentioned, in relation to recommending that State and Territory governments establish policies which provide for reasonable access to libraries as facilities for adult education.

In 1996 the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee conducted an inquiry into developments in adult and community education in Australia since the 1991 report. This inquiry report, *Beyond Cinderella: towards a learning society*, supports the significant contribution made by public libraries to adult education and literacy development (and much of this funded through the organisation's budget or state or territory government programs), as outlined in the submissions by ALIA and libraries. The report criticises the development, since 1991, of a bias towards supporting funding for vocational over non-vocational programs, a situation arising from the adoption of the national training agenda policies and labour market training programs. This is evident in further diminishing opportunities for libraries to gain funding as providers of literacy and information literacy activities in a more competitive tendering environment that favours accredited providers of vocational education, and has resulted in their increasing participation in collaborative or partnership programs.

Predictably, the government's response (1998) to the report supports the commitment to the concept of life-long learning, but places it in the context of its policy initiatives for school literacy and numeracy strategies, vocational education and training, and labour market programs and assistance arrangements. Given that policy framework, there is not a lot of scope for libraries to secure program or activity funding. Adult literacy program funding is provided primarily through the Workplace English Language and Literacy program, and targeted programs for young unemployed. Within the schools sector federal government funding is being directed at literacy and numeracy benchmarking and intervention programs. A considerable amount of work has been done in these areas by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in Australia and internationally. The Association is investigating several opportunities for working with ACER to factor in the impact of school libraries and resource centres on student learning outcomes and achievement. ■

## From the vault...

**'The First Fleet carried a library specially selected by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge. It contained 200 Exercises against lying, 50 Cautions to swearers, 100 Exhortations to chastity, 100 Dissuasions from stealing, 50 Religions Made Easy and other equally riveting books for the mostly illiterate felons.'** (ALIAS vol 2:202)