Libraries in an online environment...

ALIA's response to the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee Report on the Inquiry into *Libraries in the online environment*

The Association appreciates the interest of the Senate Committee in initiating this Inquiry and welcomes the overall findings and the Committee's endorsement of the fundamental role of libraries in the Australian community and its recognition of the need for greater support for connectivity, access to online content and for national leadership in information provision.

The report, submission and evidence draw together valuable information and data on the composition, achievements and activities of and challenges for the library and information sector. This provides a valuable resource for governments, the library and information sector and the wider community.

The Committee's interest and recommendations offer a constructive contribution to the articulation and resolution of many of the issues confronting the library and information sector in its endeavours to provide information to the Australian community now and in the future.

This document sets out the Association's brief response to the recommendations prior to the government response to the inquiry. The Association is aware that support for the recommendations will be required by government for them to be put into place and the Association therefore encourages the government to do so.

ALIA will continue to advocate in relevant fora on these and other issues of significance to the sector now and for the future.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1
The Committee recommends that the National Library of Australia receive additional funding to provide improved access to Kinetica for all Australian libraries and end users. [see paragraphs 3.14 and 5.8]

ALIA response: agrees

Recommendation 2
The Committee recommends that whenever the Australian government advertises its electronic services, it adds a statement to the effect that further information can be obtained from the local public library [see paragraphs 3.24 and 5.14].

ALIA response: ALIA supports this recommendation and would encourage more consultation by governments with the library and information sector professionals in the development and content of electronic services to be available through public libraries. This would make available to governments valuable expertise in the provision of information to meet particular user needs. The mechanism for this consultation/partnership would be through the peak bodies and major institutions, with their ability to draw on the required expertise.

Recommendations 6 (c in particular) and 10 are relevant to this recommendation.

Recommendation 3
The committee recommends:

(a) the continuation of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Community Heritage Grants digitisation program; and

(b) the addition of a new National Heritage Grants program for peak cultural institutions to assist in the digitisation of their collections [see paragraphs 3.34 and 5.11].

ALIA response: ALIA supports subject to endorsement by the institutions concerned.

Recommendation 4
The Committee recommends that the Australian Research Information Infrastructure Committee (ARIIC) consider the question of the availability online of Australian postgraduate theses as a matter of priority [see paragraphs 3.37 and 5.12].

ALIA response: ALIA supports subject to the ARIIC endorsement.

Recommendation 5
If there are no alternative funding mechanisms for ongoing research into the identification and testing of adaptive technologies for the use of online equipment in public libraries by persons with disabilities, the Committee recommends the funding of another round of AccessAbility grants [see paragraphs 3.64 and 5.15].

ALIA response: ALIA supports the funding of another round of Access-Ability grants or a similar program in the 2004–2005 Federal Budget to support research into the identification and testing of adaptive technologies for the use of online equipment by persons with disabilities and their use in public libraries. Additionally the Association recommends that such funding provide assistance to public libraries for the purchase, installation and training of staff and users of the technologies and equipment. The Association has previously been a referee for successful applicants for research funding under the AccessAbility program.

Recommendation 6
The Committee recommends:

(a) that the Cultural Ministers' Council appoint a standing libraries working group to provide regular reports on library and information matters which need to be addressed as a priority;

(b) that the proposed Cultural Ministers' Council standing libraries working group develop, in consultation with other interested parties, a national information policy; and

(c) that NOIE be required to consult with the appropriate national library representatives on all matters of substance affecting the library community and the online provision of services [see paragraphs 4.10 and 5.16].

ALIA response: ALIA considers that there is both scope and need for a libraries body to inform government policy and advise on its activities and programs relevant to the library and information sector.

It supports the appointment of a standing libraries working group and that there be ALIA membership of this group to provide the wider focus that a professional association brings. The Association acknowledges the valuable work undertaken by the Cultural Ministers' Council Libraries Working Group previously with such research reports as Navigating the economy of knowledge. A national survey of users and non-users of state and public libraries (Colin Mercer, 1995) and 2020 Vision: Towards the libraries of the future (Colin Mercer and Margaret Smith, 1996) and would encourage the working group to include substantive work of this nature in its brief.

The Association notes that the Committee supports in principle the notion of a broad national information policy. It also notes the Committee's comments regarding the need for funding to be attached to such a policy for it to be anything more than aspirational (paragraph 4.8). The Association is aware of the efforts of the sector and Government over the last twenty years or so to develop a national information policy. It is also aware of developments in this area overseas. The Association

suggests that the development of a national information policy be one and not the only issue to be addressed by this working group as a matter of priority. Given the need to address a range of important issues within the operating environment of the sector it may be that a broad national information policy could be developed synchronously. The Association is of the view that such a policy should focus on information infrastructure and the generation, storage and delivery of information, and cannot diminish in any way an individual's right to equitable access to information or a library and information service provider's right to determine, in consultation with its user community and parent body, services, access and costs.

Recommendation 7
The Committee recommends:

(a) that the Australian government negotiate with telecommunications carriers to establish an 'e-rate' or discount rate for broadband access to public libraries and that, if negotiations are not successful, consider imposing a requirement on carriers under the Universal Service Obligation arrangement; and

(b) that further funds be allocated under an expanded National Broadband Strategy for expanding broadband access in libraries [see paragraphs 4.35 and 5.6].

ALIA response: ALIA supports the further funding proposals to resolve telecommunications connectivity issues and provide broadband access to public libraries. Further, ALIA would support the Australian Government securing a discount rate for broadband access to public libraries subject to the terms being beneficial to public libraries. It would strongly oppose the imposition of any conditions or limitations on equitable access and freedom of access to information through such schemes in public or educational libraries, such as the requirement for the use of filtering systems as under the United States e-rate scheme.

Recommendation 8
Noting the requirement that the *Copyright Amendment (Digital Agenda) Act 2000* be reviewed after three years of operation, the Committee recommends that that review consider the Act's extension to digital material [see paragraphs 4.47 and 5.17].

ALIA response: ALIA supports the legislative extension of legal deposit to digital material in the interests of securing continuing access to the information record and Australia's cultural heritage. It acknowledges the complexities of extending legal deposit to digital material

and considers that the relevant deposit agencies hold the expertise and capacity to work collaboratively to overcome these complexities.

The Association has made a submission to the Digital Agenda review [http://alia.org.au/advocacy/submissions/digital.agenda.review.html].

The Association welcomes the Committee's view that 'the current balance between the rights of copyright owners and access to information by users in the digital environment is an acceptable one, and that the current 'fair dealing' exceptions in current copyright legislation should not be overridden by contract provisions in licences for online resources.' (4.41) ...and that 'rather than seeking protection solely in legislation which is inevitably a slow process, copyright owners should continue to look to technology to protect their interests, if they fear they are under threat [from librarians].'(4.43)

Recommendation 9
The Committee recommends:

(a) that the National Library of Australia identify a number of key databases for which national site licencing might be desirable; and

(b) that additional Australian Government funding be extended to the National Library of Australia for this purpose [see paragraphs 4.56 and 5.10].

ALIA response: ALIA supports this recommendation and that this be done in collaboration with the sector. It encourages the Government to provide funding in its 2004 Federal Budget and out years as determined and specified by the NLA. The Association suggests that consideration of national site licences includes the generation of Australian online content which it believes is critical for our information future.
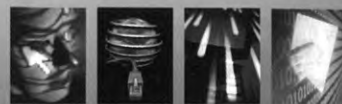
Recommendation 10
The Committee recommends:

(a) that the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) continue to consult closely with the library community over the development of the register of Australian Government publications;

(b) that NOIE publicise the availability in public libraries of the online register; and

(c) that NOIE commission research to ascertain the level of public awareness of government information and the means of access thereto [see paragraphs 4.65 and 5.9].

ALIA response: ALIA supports this recommendation, and in doing so points out its interest in ensuring the Australian community. ∎