

# Towards an inclusive learning society

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The question of promoting lifelong learning in Australia, and building Australia as an inclusive learning society, was examined in a recent project initiated by Adult Learning Australia (ALA). The project led to a report titled *Achieving Australia as an inclusive learning society*, which was released in July this year. The project also involved a discussion paper circulated in December 2004 and consultations in all states during March–April, leading to the release of the report.

The main finding from the project is that lifelong learning is poorly understood in Australia, and is seldom seen as a survival issue. This acts as a barrier to concerted partnership action by stakeholders in furthering opportunities for learning throughout life for all Australians. Such a situation has deleterious social, cultural and economic effects, and will be a barrier to Australia's development as an inclusive and successful society unless addressed in a strategic and collaborative way. Libraries, as community learning centres, can play a key role in such partnership action.

The report also highlights action being taken by other countries to develop comprehensive and coherent policies for lifelong learning. The European Union, the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada and the Nordic countries are given as examples of countries that have taken strategic action. The Nordic countries provide the best contemporary portrait of the characteristics and outcomes of a committed learning society, with strong performance across a range of school, adult literacy, values, innovation and knowledge economy indicators (these indicators include the OECD Pisa assessments of school outcomes at age 15, and ICT League and Global Competitiveness reports prepared for the World Economic Forum).

While Australia lags behind leading OECD countries in developing a comprehensive national framework for lifelong learning, there are many relevant initiatives at federal, state/territory and local levels that are widening lifelong learning opportunities.

At a state level, Tasmania is the pacesetter with comprehensive policies across a range of sectors. While various commendable initiatives exist in other states, these are seldom joined up in comprehensive and coherent frameworks for lifelong learning.

Of particular interest for libraries are the innovative learning community initiatives emerging across Australia, in some cases with the active support of local government councils. The Hume Global Learning Village, Yarra Ranges Learning Communities, Buloke Learning Towns and initiatives in Marion and Salisbury illustrate the great potential and value of local initiatives. A current project in Thuringowa in Queensland is a library-led initiative which will have considerable value in exploring the leadership roles of libraries in learning community initiatives.

## Pathways towards an inclusive learning society

The *Achieving Australia* report is built around five key pathways towards an inclusive learning society:

- empowering individuals as motivated and capable lifelong learners;
- sustaining and transforming communities through learning;
- using technology to extend learning environments and to transform the way we learn;
- developing the workplace as a key learning environment to underpin economic objectives;
- extending and connecting partnerships and networks to build Australia as an inclusive learning society.

There is considerable value in examining how libraries can contribute to the development process in each of these areas.

The report also emphasises the wider benefits of learning across sectors such as health, active ageing, welfare, and supporting families and communities. The conceptual model underpinning the report involves building social, identity and human capital in interactive and creative ways.

Overall, the main message of the report is that strategic partnership action is imperative to extend learning opportunities throughout life. This will require vision, leadership and new forms of partnership and collaborative action.

While much needs to be done, the report identifies five immediate priorities.

- Institute a national campaign for learning.
- Encourage and support the extension of community learning partnerships across Australia in many contexts.
- Build up the research and knowledge base on lifelong learning, including establishing a national focal point with links to all relevant sources.
- Continue to promote innovation in the role of technology in supporting learning.
- Target disadvantage and exclusion through action across these priority areas.

Without doubt, libraries can make a significant contribution in each of these areas, and there is value in fostering an ongoing dialogue on the nature of such a contribution.

## The ALA follow-up

The ALA is actively following up key themes of the *Achieving Australia* report. Priorities include exploring the feasibility of a National Alliance for Learning to combine the efforts of organisations (including library organisations) with an interest in promoting learning, examining how to encourage and support local learning initiatives, finding ways to strengthen workplace learning, and promoting awareness of the wider benefits of learning.

Libraries and library organisations can be key players in this national collaborative action to strengthen learning throughout life in our community, and to extend learning opportunities to excluded Australians. Often the ripple effects of initiatives can lead to unforeseen benefits. For example, the innovative Hume Global Learning Village began as an initiative to acquire a public library for Broadmeadows. Libraries can be active partners, and leaders, in building the necessary culture of learning and innovation in communities.

It is worth pondering the final sentence of the *Achieving Australia* report, which reads: *Learning is not compulsory, but neither is survival.*

Learning *is* a survival issue for Australian society and merits a commensurate investment in Australia's future by all stakeholders with vision and leadership. Will we be wise enough and smart enough to achieve such a vision? ■

## National Advisory Congress

The ALIA Board of Directors invites all members to participate in this year's National Advisory Congress (NAC) by attending their local regional meeting.

For information about the NAC go to <http://alia.org.au/governance/nac/> or contact Georgina Dale, ph 02 6215 8229; e-mail [georgina.dale@alia.org.au](mailto:georgina.dale@alia.org.au). Details of your nearest regional meeting are at <http://alia.org.au/events/>. ■