Roxanne Missingham
ALIA President

Feedback to *your* Board of Directors

Board members welcome your comments and feedback. Please feel free to contact a Board member at any time.

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Australia 2020

With the new federal government comes a quest for new policy ideas and community engagement. The Prime Minister announced that the 'Australia 2020' summit will be held on 19 and 20 April 2008 and the media release outlining the purpose and key issues is available at **http://www.australia2020.gov.au/news/index.cfm**

In summary:

> "The Summit aims to bring together some of the best and brightest brains from across the country to tackle the long term challenges confronting Australia's future - challenges which require long-term responses from the nation beyond the usual three year electoral cycle."

ALIA considers that it is very important to have the LIS profession represented. The key area relevant to libraries is economic infrastructure, the digital economy and the future of our cities. A submission is being prepared in conjunction with other library associations and will be jointly presented by ALIA and Public Libraries Australia. ALIA's advocacy for public access to information and library services fits within this topic.

Literacy – the greatest Australian challenge

In January, three major reports were released that cast a less than positive light on Australia's preparedness to participate in the global digital economy. Bypassing strategies such as the national broadband roll out and the creation of digital businesses and government, these reports focused on the basic literacy skill levels of Australians, thus limiting the nations ability to engage with the digital economy and the world of print.

Overall literacy in Australia is not to the standard of other developed countries. In January the Australian Bureau of Statistics released their report *Adult literacy and life skills survey*, publication number 4228.0. The publication contains the results of the 2006 *Adult literacy and life skills survey*, covering the domains of prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem solving of 15 to 74 year olds.

Level 3 is the 'minimum required for individuals to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work in the emerging knowledge-based economy'. Overall almost half of the Australian population, approximately 7 million, failed to achieve level 3 or higher in prose and document literacy; considered to be critical skills for using the internet and other day to day materials such as newspapers and forms.

The results for school students are somewhat more promising. The Productivity Commissions Report on government services 2008[1] found that 91.1–94.3 per cent of assessed year 3 students achieved the reading benchmark in 2005 while 85.7–89.3 per cent of year 5 students and 89–90.6 per cent of year 7 students achieved the benchmark. However, for indigenous students, the literacy rate was significantly lower which can only be worrying for the future of the nation.

What does this all mean? Commentator Ilana Snyder[2] has criticised newspapers, particularly *The Australian*, for misrepresenting the nation's literacy and "what goes on in classrooms". But literacy is an issue with a broader set of influences than just school education. Parents, libraries and communities play key roles in developing literacy in young Australians, particularly prior to starting school.

Australians are supported in their development of literacy/reading, education, business, community and digital access through a network of approximately 1522 public library service points. Australians use these libraries heavily, making over 108 million visits in 2005-06; an average of five visits per head of population. Usage of libraries has continued to increase with 178 million items being lent to 9.9 million members of Australia's public libraries.

In 2008 library programs include 'rhyme time' or 'baby bounce' sessions that build literacy through rhythm and song skills. Many libraries have reading, social and book club groups that engage the younger generation in reading and literacy.

Better internet access through a new national broadband network and computers in schools will improve access to information; however it remember that information on the internet is of variable quality and reliability. Australian libraries have selected quality electronic resources covering general reference (including encyclopedia), Australian news and business information and health information through a national consortium, Electronic Resources Australia (ERA). Funding to ensure that all libraries have access to such a resource is paramount.

Australian literacy levels are not something of which we should be proud. National debate should go beyond learning at school and encompass business, community and libraries; recognising that improvements can only be made if the wider community is involved.

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We are all saddened by the passing of Harrison Bryan AO MA Hon LLD FASSA FLAA, an eminent Australian librarian. An obituary will be in the next issue of *inCite* and a special feature in the *Australian Library Journal* (ALJ).

1. http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/rogs/2008
2. Snyder, I (2008) *The literacy wars*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin.