

Submission
to
Adult Learning Australia
“Towards a Learning Revolution in Australia”
Consultation Paper
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A) Summary

The Council of Australian State Libraries welcomes this initiative of Adult Learning Australia in commissioning a Consultation Paper and promoting national dialogue on the future directions for lifelong learning in Australia.

Libraries collect, manage and give access to the resources that support adult learning across Australia. As the population ages and employment patterns change, an increasing number of Australians are engaged in lifelong learning for work or for personal interest. Whether people are attending courses through educational institutions, community-based organisations or private training centres, or if they are engaged in informal self-directed study, libraries are a central support for their learning.

Libraries are also important providers of education programs, particularly in information literacy. This can be on many different levels, from introductory sessions on how to conduct research, access resources and use information effectively, through to sessions exploring detailed and complex collections or online information resources.

The Council of Australian State Libraries (CASL) is the peak body representing the National, State and Territory Libraries throughout Australiaⁱ. These major libraries, with the public library networks in each state, provide equitable access to information for the entire community, irrespective of socio-economic factors, changing demographic profiles or geographic divisions. There are more than 1700 service points across Australia in CASL and public libraries and more than 5 millionⁱⁱ visits are made to CASL libraries each year, with this number rising to 58 millionⁱⁱⁱ when public libraries are included. In 2002, 42.1% of the population aged over 18 visited a library once or more than once^{iv}. Libraries are busy, vibrant centres of information and the hub for lifelong learning in metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

Because of separate funding and governance conditions operating across the education and library sectors, and the wide range of private and community organisations involved in lifelong learning, integrated planning is limited and current initiatives are unrecognised. CASL recommends the establishment of a national formal communication mechanism under the auspices of the Federal Government, such as that outlined in Scenario 4 of the Consultation Paper, to work towards an integrated national framework.

Recommendation

Adult Learning Australia support the establishment of a formal national communication mechanism with the key industry sectors involved in providing lifelong learning in Australia, including National, State and public libraries. The objective of this new body would be to plan an effective framework and strategy for future directions in lifelong learning.

B) Lifelong learning at CASL Libraries

Collections, expertise, facilities and access.

CASL libraries support learning throughout the community by providing collections, professional expertise, facilities and access. With the changes in work practices, retirement expectations, job security, technology and attitudes to learning, the demand to upgrade skills, to diversify knowledge and to continue learning is increasing. Libraries provide the infrastructure to support this learning in the community and contribute to building the information literacy skills needed to assess and use information effectively.

More than 50% of the clients using the National, State and Territory Libraries (more than 2.5 million visits per year) describe themselves as students with approximately 90% of this group from the tertiary education sector^v. Some of this group are adult learners or those returning to formal education. The Australian Bureau of Statistics calculates that 7.3% of Australians aged 25-64 are engaged in full-time or part-time study with an educational institution^{vi}.

In addition, a large part of the other 50% of clients are adult learners, describing themselves as independent learners, private researchers, using the libraries for leisure or social activity, etc. They may be engaged in self-directed learning or they may be supporting their participation in a learning program that is based outside the library in a wide range of educational and community organisations.

CASL Libraries and public libraries are “accessible to all, safe, neutral, non-threatening, non-judgmental, non-competitive ... built around trust and community involvement”^{vii}. They are busy centres for learning activity, open for long hours including nights, weekends and public holidays, and provide free access not only to their own extensive collections but to online information through the internet and other computer applications. They have the space and environment conducive to learning, usually in highly visible locations in city centres, suburbs, regional centres and small towns, accessible by public transport. They also provide mobile and outreach services for hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, etc. They are staffed by qualified librarians.

Many private and government providers of lifelong learning programs, who do not have adequate library facilities to support the learning needs of their students, send them to CASL and public libraries.

Learning programs and information literacy

CASL libraries provide a wide range of learning programs such as seminars, workshops, lectures, exhibitions, English conversation classes, formal teaching sessions, tours, web content and learning centres, as well as one-to-one advice. They recognise that people’s information needs change throughout their lives and that learning improves many aspects of life from employability to creativity and personal growth.

Teaching sessions, tours, workshops and seminars are the formal component of learning programs provided by CASL Libraries. As an example, the State Library of Victoria provided these types of formal education sessions to more than 20,000 people in the financial year 2003-2004^{viii} and these large numbers would be reflected across the other CASL Libraries. Many of these courses focus on information literacy in some form, introducing people to how to use the library, how to use and evaluate information resources, or how to use a specific resource, collection or technology to gain information. They also inspire people to follow and develop their interests.

Information literacy is behind the ability to use information effectively, “an information literate person has learned how to learn”^{ix}. As stated in the CASL Information Literacy Standards^x:

“Information literacy is a prerequisite for lifelong learning and is common to all disciplines, all learning environments and all levels of education. It enables learners to engage critically with content, become self-directed, and have greater control over their learning. It is not only about access and information and communication technology skills, but goes beyond that to mean having the knowledge, skills and authority to engage with information productively.”

Currently information literacy is invisible in the general community. It is part of most school curricula and addressed by programs within tertiary education institutions but is rarely considered in terms of the broader community and lifelong learning. Information literacy skills are particularly crucial for older people in trying to develop their skills and knowledge in a changing technological environment. Recognition of the importance of information literacy programs should be addressed as a fundamental issue in considering the future directions of lifelong learning.

C) Computer literacy and access to ICT

The ability to use a computer has become a basic requirement for communication and accessing information. Computer literacy has become a pre-requisite for independent information seeking and for taking part in many of the lifelong learning opportunities available in the community.

Over the past ten years, libraries have become known as free access points to the internet for information seeking, for those who do not have access at home, through their employer or educational institution. Because of this they are also often the first place that a novice might approach to learn about the internet.

Many CASL libraries and public libraries provide internet, email and basic computer skills training sessions to the public at low cost, as part of their lifelong learning programs. Many of the participants who attend these courses are aged 50-80, a group which is less likely to learn these skills in other education or employment environments. CASL Libraries are also regular contributors to Seniors Week and other initiatives that promote opportunities for learning and skill development in regional and rural communities.

D) “Libraries in the Online Environment” Senate Inquiry

In October 2003, the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee tabled a report on *Libraries in the online environment*.^{xi} The eleven recommendations from this senate inquiry outline key strategies to enable libraries to respond to the changing technological environment. Of particular importance is Recommendation 7a) :

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;

Though the Government did not agree to Recommendation 7(a), the Council of Australian State Libraries strongly supports it and the other recommendations of the senate inquiry. An ‘e-rate’ for broadband access would allow continued and expanded internet access throughout the CASL and public library networks, underpinning lifelong learning throughout metropolitan, rural and regional areas.

E) Technological barriers to participation in lifelong learning

Studies in Australia^{xii} and in the USA^{xiii} have shown the “digital divide” is a reality, restricting access to technology along socio-economic and geographical divisions. Public libraries with their free access to internet and other support services help to redress this inequity. The increases in personal computer ownership and internet access are beginning to level off so it is expected that demand for access through libraries will remain in the longer term.

Also, there are areas throughout Australia where internet access has not reached an acceptable level. As the Senate Inquiry report states, “there are still technological black spots

which need to be addressed and there is the pressing need to provide greater bandwidth to enable users to make full use of the ever-increasing range of online services.”^{xiv}

F) Lifelong Learning in rural and regional areas

Access to the internet at public libraries is a vital infrastructure service in rural and regional areas. This has been recognised extensively in the Senate Report into Libraries in the Online Environment. In particular, the need to enable all areas to access consistent, fast and high-quality internet at an affordable level.

Most public libraries in rural and regional areas provide free access to the internet for information seeking, and library staff are available to assist and to teach. Some libraries also provide access to computer applications for word-processing, spreadsheets, etc. This access to the internet and to other computer applications is essential infrastructure to support re-training in these areas.

Also, many public libraries throughout Australia act as central points for accessing community information including the opportunities for adult learning available in that area.

G) Conclusion

The Council of Australian State Libraries recommends that the Federal Government establish and support a mechanism to develop a national framework for lifelong learning, and that all key sectors involved in the provision of lifelong learning be included. Issues such as increasing information literacy in the community, access and affordability of technology, and integration between sectors could be addressed within this framework.

The Council of Australian State Libraries also recommends that Adult Learning Australia recognise the important role of libraries in lifelong learning, perhaps by including “libraries” in Question 12 of the List of Questions, Attachment A, *Towards a Learning Revolution in Australia* Consultation Paper.

Council of Australian State Libraries
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- ⁱ CASL Members: State Library of Western Australia, State Library of South Australia, State Library of Victoria, Australian Capital Territory Library & Information Service, State Library of New South Wales, Northern Territory Library and Information Service, State Library of Tasmania, State Library of Queensland, National Library of Australia.
- ⁱⁱ CASL, Key Performance Indicators, 2002.
- ⁱⁱⁱ CASL, Key Performance Indicators, 2002.
- ^{iv} Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1301.0 2004
- ^v CASL, Key Performance Indicators, 2002.
- ^{vi} Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1301.0, 2004.
- ^{vii} "Changing Lives, Making the Difference: The 21st Century Public Library", by Alan Bundy, Australian Public Libraries and Information Services, March 2003.
- ^{viii} State Library of Victoria, Lifelong Learning Statistics, July 2003-June 2004.
- ^{ix} Council of Australian University Libraries Literacy Standards, www.caul.edu.au/documents
- ^x <http://www.casl.org.au/papers/casl/information.literacy.standards.pdf>
- ^{xi} Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee, Libraries in the online environment, October 2003.
- ^{xii} Evidence to Libraries in the online environment, Mr Gary Hardy, Monash University, October 2003.
- ^{xiii} "Towards Equality of Access: The Role of Public Libraries in Addressing the Digital Divide", American Library Association et al, 2003.
- ^{xiv} Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee, Libraries in the online environment, October 2003, p.82.