

So who *is* an Australian?



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ALIA's first object is 'To promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy and democracy'. Just twenty-two words convey the essence of what we profess for a better Australia and world, regardless of that sector of the profession which may claim our affiliation or interest. It is a statement not, however, without nuance. That part of it which attracts some attention is the sense of 'free'. This applies primarily to 'flow' not to cost. However, it also neatly conveys that, as far as is possible, capacity to pay should not inhibit access to information and ideas.

The part of ALIA's first object which has not been much reflected on is the meaning of 'all Australians' although that national equity imperative underpins most of ALIA's policy statements, for example those on services for people with disabilities, home delivery services and information literacy.

In just one of those areas, library services for people with disabilities, Australia has made significant progress, with adaptive technology now a major facilitator as demonstrated through the research of Kirsty Williamson, Don Schauder and their colleagues at Monash University.

Further research in this area is now possible thanks to the establishment of the ALIA Twila Ann Jessen Herr Award with generous funding provided by our Tasmanian colleague and ALIA Fellow Twila Herr to enable her lifetime work in the area to continue. It was a highlight of my presidential year to accept the donation from Twila in her Tasmanian nursing home in January, and to be able to reassure her that the award will benefit those with MS and other forms of disability which impact on the daily lives of nearly one in five Australians.

That equity and social inclusion imperative which is a significant marker of a civil society has been greatly challenged by recent events in Australia, to the disquiet of many. No less has there been, by admission of the principals, major disruption to the free flow of information about events involving asylum seekers in their voyages to Australia and subsequently in what are officially designated 'Immigration Reception and Processing Centres' but which even by the federal government are called 'detention centres'. So what has this to do with our profession and ALIA, when the asylum seekers are not Australians?

The reference to 'the interest of all Australians' in ALIA's first object is, of course, not to be narrowly defined to those who are legally Australians — if it were a sizeable population of Australian residents would not

be our concern. Similarly, the 'interest' of all Australians implies that we — the profession and ALIA — concern ourselves with matters global, and in response to this to the new ALIA International Relations Advisory Committee at its first meeting in February spent considerable time discussing assistance to East Timor and Afganistan. Your association is a member — a well regarded one — of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. The International Relations Advisory Committee also discussed the belated response from the federal government to my enquiry several months ago about the availability of library and information resources in the detention centres. This response was described on p54 of the January-February issue of *inCite*, and read in part

Limited library facilities consisting of reading materials and rooms, are provided at all detention centres...The material held is in both English and community languages and includes material for children as well as adults. In addition to the books, major Australian newspapers, both English and community language ones, are available...

That response, of course, refers only to detention centres on the Australian mainland — it begs a question about the provision of resources in the Australian-funded centres elsewhere. More recent correspondence from Australasian Correctional Management Pty Ltd, which manages the detention centres, states

ACM would be delighted to host visits...to look at the rudimentary systems in place at the detention centres...

This was in response to my request to ACM that it facilitate visits by professional members of ALIA to the centres to evaluate their resources.

ALIA will continue to pursue this issue because it *is* in 'the interest of all Australians' — and of those likely to become one. If you are able to assist by visiting the centres in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Woomera, Port Hedland and Derby (Curtin) please let me know [alan.bundy@alia.org.au].

It is of some consolation that those asylum seekers who survive their detention with their sanity and optimism relatively intact, will have free access to Australia's multicultural public libraries — and perhaps grow to appreciate through them that beyond their experience of retribution, there is a more enlightened, humane, inclusive and welcoming Australia. Agree? Disagree? Let *inCite* know [incite@alia.org.au]. ■

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