

## Nurturing our memory: creating the 21st century nation

As Australia faces the 21st century many issues are challenging us, not the least how to create a society that is capable of living effectively in this networked age, contributing to the national economy, and living creatively. Libraries and information skills are vital to enable the nation to achieve these goals. The Australian Library and Information Association has an enormously important role as the national, cross-sectoral body raising library and information issues.

A great wealth of community, educational, scientific, political, government, and original material has been collected by Australian libraries over the centuries. We have collected the history of the nation's great and small events – be they wars, social change, the people who have made the nation, or the places where we live. The materials we have collected are in many different forms – including oral, printed, pictorial, personal histories, and objects. It is these treasured memories and the new ones that are being created that are our special contribution to Australian knowledge and life.

ALIA provides the opportunity for an intersection for those with interest in our history, present, and future to come together. Australians pass through different library doors at the different stages of their lives. Children enjoy stories and activities in their public library, supported by ALIA through the reading programs and now the National Year of Reading. These events enable communities small or large to share ideas, material, authors, and inspiration. The wonderful contribution of many in public libraries is recognised through the ALIA Library Stars Program. I encourage you to read the nominations in past years and go to the web site (<http://www.alia.org.au/governance/committees/public.libraries/librystars2010/>) to be inspired by projects across the nation that create literacy, reading, and vibrancy in their communities. In publicising the projects ALIA provides a great base of knowledge for libraries to share, grow, and cooperate. In addition their local government agencies can be recognised for the support they provide to their communities through outstanding libraries.

The school environment provides a great opportunity for development of the knowledge skills that are vital for participation in our community and workplaces. ALIA's work with the Australian School Library Association has seen the development of inspiring submissions to the House of Representatives Education and Training Standing Committee's Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians. Cooperative work has also led to *A Manual for Developing Policies and Procedures in Australian School Library Resource Centre* and Standards of professional excellence for teacher librarians. As a national body ALIA has a strong and unbiased voice which is vital for advocacy in an area where there are significant differences by state and territory, divisiveness which does not benefit students, teachers, or library staff.

In the area of higher and technical education ALIA's role in copyright and creating opportunities to share and build new knowledge through conferences and professional development activities is very important. Encouraging research and more importantly the sharing of research is essential for a true profession and to encourage us to continue to development and redevelop our services and systems to be the best we can. ALIA's work in advocating public access to research, public sector information, and quality electronic resources is again an area where an organisation that is not focused on particular sector is able to pursue achieving great benefits for Australians, wherever they are.

For state, national, and special libraries ALIA's support provides discussion spaces for issues that need national action, such as advocacy, copyright, and internet filtering. The fostering of communication across sectors and research also empowers

these libraries to continue to change and review services to reach out in new and powerful ways, not the least using web 2.0 technologies.

It is particularly important for there to be a national organisation that focuses on what management literature would call a "big hairy goal" – literacy. Overall literacy in Australia is not adequate. We do not achieve the standards of many other developed countries. The Australian Bureau of Statistics report, *Adult literacy and life skills survey of prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy, and problem solving of 15- to 74-year-olds* found that prose and document literacy, which are essential skills in order to use the internet and day-to-day materials such as newspapers and forms, had small but statistically significant decreases in the proportion of people at the lowest level since 1996. The results for the "minimum required for individuals to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work in the emerging knowledge-based economy" were 35 per cent for document literacy and 37 per cent for prose literacy. Slightly less than half of the Australian population, approximately 7 million, failed to achieve the minimum required level or higher in prose and document literacy. Australian literacy ranks poorly compared to Canada and Norway, although it is higher than Italy or the United States.

Leigh and Ryan's study of education productivity, published in 2008, found that the literacy and numeracy skills of young Australian teenagers (aged 13-14) have fallen over the past few decades. Numeracy skills fell in the period 1964-2003, and both literacy and numeracy skills fell in the period 1975-1998. Worryingly, Leigh and Ryan note that, while literacy and numeracy skills fell, real expenditure per child increased by 10 per cent in the period 1975-1998 and by 258 per cent from 1964-2003. The authors found a decline in school productivity which suggests that investment in the form of increased expenditure has not been made in the areas where it could make the most difference. In fact, it has not just failed to increase literacy, it has actually reduced the results for teenagers at school.

While Australians are served by more public library service points than McDonald restaurants, libraries in tertiary institutions, cafes, workplaces, national, state, and territories, and many special libraries, such as law, health, and government libraries, much needs to be done to endure an informed and information literate citizenry. ALIA's role in creating awareness of issues, developing standards, model practices, and places where we can develop frameworks, such as the ALIA Public Library Summit, is absolutely vital.

I think that we need to support a great national vision through ALIA and marshal to the best of our ability our colleagues and stakeholders in working on practical ways to create the sort of nation that is needed to be successful in the twenty first century. ALIA provide an opportunity for us to share visions and creation a passionate commitment to create services that have national impact on the vital issues of today.

### Roxanne Missingham

Parliamentary Librarian

ALIA President (May 2007 – May 2008)

[roxanne.missingham@aph.gov.au](mailto:roxanne.missingham@aph.gov.au)