

AUSTRALIAN LIBRARIES

STATE OF THE NATION

REPORT

These are challenging times for libraries around the world, with no sector immune from a tight funding regime. We look at what the current climate means for Australian libraries.

The availability of data about Australian libraries varies according to the sector. Standardised annual reporting by public libraries, collated by the State Library of Queensland, provides a full statistical picture, freely available on the National and State Libraries of Australia website (bit.ly/2RCUEdw). Detailed statistics also exist for the university sector and can be viewed on the Council of Australian University Librarians website (bit.ly/2PI2hDB). They are embargoed for five years but recent statistics may be released on request. At the other end of the scale, there are no national statistics for school or special libraries, and data at a state and territory level is patchy.

Within the limitations of the available data, ALIA estimates there are 13,650 library locations in metropolitan, regional and remote Australia, with some 27,500 staff employed in libraries and information services. We believe there are approximately 12.9 million users in communities, schools, universities, TAFEs, government departments, research agencies, hospitals, NGOs, law firms, banks, media channels, technology companies and other knowledge-based enterprises.

We estimate that the annual investment in library and information services in Australia is in the region of \$2.8 billion.

SCHOOL LIBRARIES

In 2017, there were 9,444 schools in Australia and almost all schools have a library of some description. The best school libraries have qualified library staff and

provide a range of services to students, including safer online experiences, group discovery-based learning and study spaces, and more electronic resources.

Funding pressures in the education sector have been reflected in school libraries, particularly in the government sector, leading to budget cuts and reductions in qualified staff numbers and hours. In October 2018, the School Library Coalition, of which ALIA Schools is a founding member, launched the 'Students need school libraries' campaign to raise awareness of these issues.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

In 2015 to 2016 there were 1,656 public library service points, 113 million customer visits and 9.4 million registered library members. Total expenditure on public libraries was \$1.18 billion or the equivalent of \$49.11 per Australian. Independent studies have shown that for every dollar invested in public libraries, there is at least a \$2.90 return in terms of community benefits.

During 2018, ALIA's Australian Public Library Alliance (APLA) actively promoted the role of public libraries in digital inclusion, literacy and learning, and worked with the book industry to expand the Australian Reading Hour, achieving an estimated reach of more than two million people. APLA also supported state and territory initiatives, most notably the NSW 'Renew our Libraries' campaign, which gained the promise of \$60 million from the NSW Government.

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

There are 199 libraries in Australian universities, employing approximately 7,000 staff and providing library and information services to 1.3 million higher education students. The outstanding service provided by Australia's university libraries supports the government's international education agenda. In 2018, ALIA has been exploring the provision of library and information services to higher education students studying with

private providers, with the aim of developing a new set of library guidelines to inform educators and the accrediting bodies.

TAFE LIBRARIES

There are 246 libraries in TAFEs (government-funded vocational education institutions). TAFE library teams give every TAFE student the best chance of success, supporting their training and helping them develop lifelong learning skills. Libraries have been caught up in TAFE restructuring around Australia, which has had an impact on budgets and staffing. Heading into 2019, only Victoria retains diverse institutions, with TAFE NSW the latest to go through the amalgamation process – 10 institutes reducing to one. The ALIA VET Libraries Advisory Committee has mapped changes and provides an up-to-date listing of TAFE libraries on the ALIA website.

SPECIAL LIBRARIES

We estimate there are approximately 2,000 special libraries in Australia including government, health, law, corporate and other libraries that serve the public sector, institutions, businesses, arts and heritage, charities and not for profit organisations.

Health Libraries Australia (HLA) is one of ALIA's most active Groups. Among other initiatives, HLA carried out a census of health libraries, which identified a shortage of librarians and the need for more information specialists.

It was a sign of the times that our Special Libraries Working Group published *Guidelines for special libraries experiencing service reviews* in 2018. Government libraries are under the spotlight and ALIA will be better placed to support these libraries moving forward, with the Australian Government Library and Information Network having become an ALIA Group at the end of 2018.

Special libraries have embraced digital transformation at the cost of visibility, as people access the resources, they need online but fail to make the connection between the information delivered to their device and the library team that has made this possible.

COLLECTING INSTITUTIONS

The National Library of Australia, State Libraries of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia, the Northern Territory Library and ACT Heritage Library collect, manage and make accessible the Australian human

record. In 2016 to 2017, these libraries had collections valued at \$5.3 billion. They welcomed some 12.5 million visitors to their buildings and 74.2 million visits to their websites.

ALIA works closely with National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA), which represents these institutions, and a focus for 2018 was promoting the extent to which libraries contribute to Australia's achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. NSLA heads joined us for the Asia-Pacific LIS Sustainable Development Goals Summit on the Gold Coast in July.

Overall, libraries struggle with reduced budgets, whether it's the National Library absorbing efficiency dividend cuts of circa 2% per annum or a school library trying to fund additional electronic resources out of a static funding allocation. At the same time, libraries must accommodate a growing population and higher client expectations, driven by what is happening online and in the retail market. The demand for digital (and digitised) resources requires more money not less. The equation is impossible to balance, and ALIA continues to advocate for further investment by governments, academia, and businesses. 🌟

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Melbourne 13–15 November 2019
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