



HE. Ms. Michelle Bachelet,
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Palais des Nations
CH-1211 GENEVA 10,
Switzerland

Dear High Commissioner,

Please find below a joint submission from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, Prins Willem-Alexanderhof 5, 2595 BE, The Hague, The Netherlands, www.ifla.org) and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA, ALIA House, 9-11 Napier Close, Deakin, ACT 2600, Australia www.alia.org.au) for the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in Australia.

IFLA is the global organisation for libraries and library associations, founded in 1927, at present with over 1500 members in more than 150 countries. IFLA works to represent the interests of library and information services and their users, and is committed to promoting the principles of universal and equitable access to information and freedom of expression as drivers of development and well-being.

The Australian Library and Information Association is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. On behalf of its 5,000 personal and institutional members, ALIA provides the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support.

Overview

1. According to the latest Australian Public Libraries Statistical Report, there are 1,670 ‘public library service points and outlets’ in Australia, including central and branch libraries, mobile libraries and other outlets. These libraries receive more than 111 million physical visits annually and 51 million online visits¹ In addition, ALIA has estimated that there are approximately 450 libraries in universities and technical and future education institutions, 2000 special libraries (such as law or government libraries, health libraries, etc.) and 9400 school libraries in the country.²
2. The work of the library sector is aligned with, and directly contributes to the human rights codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 19. and in 2017, ALIA Members voted to introduce a new Object of the Association which specifically referenced this Article.³ Freedom to receive and impart information and ideas through any media and without barriers, as part of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, is central to the work of libraries. Australian libraries help deliver on these rights by promoting open access and connecting people to knowledge and information - as codified in the ALIA core values policy statement.⁴
3. Furthermore, libraries in Australia carry out a wide range of activities in the areas of digital inclusion, literacy, lifelong learning, access to culture and community development.^{5 6} These, in turn, are linked to the right to education, the rights of Indigenous populations, and the right to participate in cultural life. Through these efforts, libraries in Australia have carried out work which addresses several recommendations made in the previous review cycle. These include recommendations 136.123, 136.129, 136.78, 136.114, 136.190, and 136.211.

Access to information, the right to culture and intellectual freedom

4. A key objective of libraries is to offer access to knowledge and information to all and help overcome information access barriers. Australia has unique geographic challenges. It is the world's sixth largest country in land mass, yet it has a population of fewer than 26 million people. Australia has language challenges. According to the 2016 Census⁷, 27% of the population speaks a language other than English at home and there are more than 100 Indigenous Australian languages in use today, although many are at risk⁸. Providing this dispersed, diverse population with access to information requires both a local and a national response. Locally, this is achieved by maintaining relevant library collections in languages appropriate to the community, helping users find the information they need within library collections and publicly available resources, as well as helping people develop information literacy – the skills to find and critically access authentic information from reputable and current sources. Nationally, there is a strong reliance on library networks for interlibrary loans and document delivery, and collaboration for major investments in digital projects such as National eDeposit (NED)⁹, a partnership between Australia's nine national, state and territory libraries, capturing and preserving the digital documentary history of Australia for the future. The increased focus on digital access to collections, through digitisation of print materials and the acquisition of born-digital content, helps connect people in regional and remote Australia with the level of information access enjoyed by those who live in metropolitan areas. Digital access also enables libraries to subscribe to a greater quantity of information in languages other than English, in addition to the books, magazines, newspapers and DVDs in language for physical borrowing. Discussions are underway with the Classification Branch of the Department of Communications to simplify the procedures for classifying films in languages other than English and further increasing the volume of content available to library users.
5. As cultural and memory institutions, libraries in Australia work to make cultural materials more accessible for the wider public, helping deliver on people's **right to participate in cultural life**. Alongside traditional lending services, libraries continuously work to make their collections more discoverable and usable, promoting people's engagement with cultural materials. As described above, digital access is essential to address the tyranny of distance experienced by Australians. The National Library of Australia's Trove service provides access to Australian library collections, digitised newspapers, photographs, cultural works, and the Australian web archive. Despite the welcome recent announcement of an \$8 million contribution from the Australian Government¹⁰, further ongoing funding is required to continue providing these services.¹¹ Many libraries have digitised and made available public domain texts and images in their collections. State Library Victoria, for example, had made 200,000 public domain materials freely available through a digital image pool over the course of 2019.¹² Such library initiatives allow for greater freedom of access to cultural and heritage materials.
6. Successful advocacy by the Australian Libraries Copyright Committee, of which ALIA, the Council of Australian University Librarians and National and State Libraries Australia are founder members, has resulted in reforms to copyright law, which have greatly assisted with increased access to information. In 2017, the Australian Parliament passed an amendment which resulted in the same terms of copyright for both published and unpublished works. In 2018, libraries were given safe harbour protection. However, there are further reforms which would assist libraries, including those relating to orphan works and the inability to override legislated exceptions by contract terms. Further flexible exceptions would be welcome, and ultimately a fair use environment would provide the greatest opportunity for increased access.
7. Related to copyright is the move towards more open access, particularly for information which is government-funded. ALIA has been an active voice in the Australian Government's data sharing and release legislative reforms consultation, supporting the appointment of a National Data Commissioner as a safeguard to balance appropriate access for researchers with security of information for the individuals whose data is being used.
8. Furthermore, libraries support **digital inclusion** as part of their overarching mission of broadening access to information. According to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index, more than 2.5 million

Australians are not online.¹³ Australian public libraries offer a nation-wide infrastructure for public internet access, computers and workstations, digital literacy learning opportunities and one-on-one support, access to software and ‘makerspaces’.¹⁴ These services can be particularly important for people most at risk of being left behind – whether because they have no reliable or affordable internet access, no access to devices or because they are not confident with their digital skills. Australia’s geography creates further access challenges with libraries providing services in regions where no other options exist.

9. For instance, programmes like Telstra-funded Tech Savvy Seniors and the Australian Government-funded Be Connected help ensure that older people have an opportunity to learn digital skills to access to digital opportunities (from personal business to education) and socialise.¹⁵¹⁶ In remote areas, public internet access through libraries can be of particular significance. The Northern Territory Library, for example, worked together with CAYLU – the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service – to create computer rooms in remote Aboriginal Communities, facilitating the use of e-government and e-finance services, digital inclusion, learning and skills development. A 2017 report by ALIA further discusses the range of library services supporting digital inclusion and helping overcome barriers to the digital economy.¹⁷
10. Media literacy, especially among young people, has been highlighted as being of particular concern during the COVID-19 pandemic. Australian school libraries have a special focus on cybersafety and assisting young people to navigate the internet confidently. They have also been at the forefront of media literacy, helping the school community to recognise fake news from authentic sources. ALIA and National and State Libraries Australia are founder members of the Australian Media Literacy Alliance, which is in the process of being established to tackle this issue at a national level. There is concern that the drop in media plurality in Australia, as a result of the loss of regional and local newspapers and other media outlets, makes combating misinformation and disinformation even more challenging¹⁸.
11. All the efforts outlined above are part of libraries’ work to promote access to knowledge and information and, more broadly, intellectual freedom. However, there is an ongoing debate surrounding **freedom of information and expression** in Australia. A series of legislative acts including metadata retention have been argued by media organisations and outlets to negatively impact the freedom of information (FOI) regime, freedom of journalism and the protection of whistle-blowers.¹⁹ Moreover, a review requested by the Minister of Education completed in 2019 suggested that further steps were needed to protect academic freedom and freedom of speech in higher education, in response peak sector body Universities Australia reiterated its longstanding support for intellectual freedom and freedom of speech.²⁰ ²¹ Freedom of information and intellectual freedom are key principles for the library sector, and libraries in Australia are observing the situation to see how this affects the public’s *right to know*.

RECOMMENDATION: Recognising the importance of equity of access to information and cultural materials, we encourage further development of a policy, funding and legislative environment which supports and enables libraries to provide greater access to collections to a greater number of people and from a diversity of backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATION: We invite the report to examine the current situation and concerns raised around freedom of expression, media and intellectual freedom in Australia.

Social cohesion, equality, and rights of vulnerable groups

Recommendations:

136.123 Continue paying special attention to the implementation of national policies for marginalized or vulnerable social groups, including migrant children, aboriginals and disabled persons (Nicaragua);

136.129 Continue further with its initiative to promote community cohesion and social harmony (Mauritius);

12. Libraries in Australia have an established role in supporting the social and economic life of their communities. As a 2012 study of the socioeconomic impact of libraries in Queensland points out, library users include those from less advantaged backgrounds, who other agencies often see as ‘hard to reach’. Library services can be of particular importance for these users: many would not be able to pay for market analogues of the services they receive for free at a public library.
13. Examples of users from more vulnerable demographic groups include, remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with lower incomes, refugees, and many others. A 2019 submission by ALIA to the Productivity Commission issues paper ‘The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health’, points out the ways public libraries support people who experience homelessness or mental health issues. People experiencing homelessness often rely on libraries as safe spaces to visit and spend time – and dedicated library programs or informal help from library staff can help them find employment, access health and government information or other important services.²²
14. Moreover, libraries serve as an important point of community inclusion for people experiencing mental health issues, with various dedicated library initiatives offering them opportunities for leisure or learning.²³ The State Library of Victoria’s *Diversity and Social Inclusion Action Plan 2017–20*, for example, shows how library approaches to promoting societal inclusion can span from passive measures (e.g. ensuring accessibility of built environments) to active interventions – engaging with communities and offering dedicated services.²⁴
15. ALIA carried out a nationwide survey of library users in May 2020, to gauge the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on communities²⁵. An analysis of the first 500 users found that, after the ability to borrow print books (87%) and to gain face-to-face help from library staff (44%), the third largest gap (40%) was ‘being around other people’. Research²⁶ has highlighted loneliness, especially among young Australians, as a problem for society and this survey confirmed the important role libraries can play in combating this.

The rights of Indigenous peoples - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Recommendations:

136.78 Continue to promote and strengthen the rights of Indigenous peoples (Djibouti);

136.114 Continue concerted efforts for the preservation of the cultural and linguistic identity of Indigenous peoples (Greece);

16. “Respect for the diversity, individuality and equality of all and recognition of the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” is coded as one of the key values of the library and information services professionals in Australia.²⁷ As key cultural heritage and memory institutions, libraries strive to promote and realise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ cultural rights and contribute to their broader societal inclusion and right to education.
17. Libraries are currently working to adapt their services to better meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As a 2019 ‘Year in Libraries’ report points out, the Indigenous Languages Program of the State Library of Queensland (in partnership with the Australian Government Department of Communication and the Arts) supports Indigenous language revival through awareness campaigns, lectures, gatherings of communities and Elders, and more.²⁸ The ancestry and family history information services offered by the Indigenous Services team at the State Library of New South Wales have generated high demand, demonstrating how a library service can be tailored to and help meet the needs of Indigenous peoples.²⁹
18. Importantly, Australian libraries strive to adjust their collections and practices to facilitate access to (and revitalisation of) Indigenous cultural materials - guided by extensive consultations with Indigenous communities. Library collections can contain valuable cultural materials of Indigenous communities – film footage, photographs, documents and more. The State Library of Western Australia’s Storylines initiative provides for the digital return of photographs and other

materials directly to Aboriginal families, communities and people and to engage them in identifying secret and sacred material in line with cultural protocols.³⁰ ALIA members work extensively with Indigenous communities to ensure that these collections and their use are in line with the wishes of Indigenous peoples. This includes, for example, improving resource descriptions and categorisation, determining usage permissions for such cultural materials.³¹

19. A cooperation between the State Library of Queensland and 12 Indigenous Shire Councils, for example, saw the establishment of Indigenous Knowledge Centres which facilitate the “capture and retention of traditional knowledge, culture and languages”. The 2019 report “Improving library services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” includes many examples of such library work around collections that contain Indigenous materials.³²

The rights of people with disabilities

20. As part of their broader mission, Australian libraries work to ensure access to information and knowledge for people with disabilities. In light of the barriers people with health or mental issues can experience in accessing education and employment opportunities, libraries strive to support their social and digital inclusion and access to information. The now-implemented State Library of New South Wales Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2016–19 shows, for example, the ways a library can ensure broader access to library resources through adaptive technologies, hearing loop installations and accessible book collections (talking books, large print books, eBooks).³³
21. Libraries have also started exploring other ways to help meet the informational needs of people living with disabilities. For example, Mackay Regional Council Libraries have recently launched a Digital Technology Accessibility Program Pilot Project, which offers tablet loans, digital skills training and one-on-one support for two pilot groups of homebound people living with disabilities. This project aims to help members of these group make use of library e-resources and better meet their information needs – which could be especially important for a group of users which lacks social engagement.³⁴
22. On a systematic level, libraries and library staff help ensure access to culture for people with disabilities. The 2018 Discussion Paper on the National Arts and Disability Strategy prepared by Cultural Ministers mentions library visits as a way to connect with cultural products; which in turn contributes to wellbeing, enjoyment and social inclusion.³⁵
23. One of the important developments in the area of access to information for people with disabilities in Australia is the ratification and coming into force of the Marrakesh Treaty. This international treaty offers copyrights exceptions that permit greater access to reading materials in formats accessible to people with print disabilities. The Australian Inclusive Publishing Initiative (AIPI) is another example of current efforts to ensure wider access to accessible reading materials. This collaboration by a wide range of stakeholders – from the publishing industry, libraries, disability organisations and more – aims to promote ‘born-accessible’ publishing.

The rights of migrants

Recommendation:

136.190 Protect the rights of Migrants and eliminate unfair treatment of migrant workers, and ensure their integration into society (Pakistan);

24. Migrants and refugees are another group of users whose needs Australian libraries work to meet. The library sector in Australia recognises the barriers immigrant and refugees face, and offers services to meet their unique needs. The 2019 Report ‘Services for Migrants and Refugees’ offers examples of such library initiatives: from the practice of conversational English, and multilingual collections to networking events and health awareness talks in different languages.³⁶ As such, their work can be seen as threefold – meeting the cultural needs of people with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, fostering multicultural appreciation, and helping people acquire the

skills to integrate into a new culture.

25. In short, libraries in Australia are well-placed to promote civic and social inclusion and offer access to culture, knowledge and information – particularly for more vulnerable groups. Australian libraries enjoy high levels of voluntary civic participation,³⁷ and work to offer services and meet the needs of growing and diverse populations.

RECOMMENDATION: We encourage further action to support social inclusion and equity for marginalised and vulnerable communities in Australia, such as migrants and people with disabilities. We invite the report to acknowledge the role of libraries in promoting social cohesion and serving the needs of vulnerable groups in society.

The right to education

Recommendation:

136.211 Improve the quality and coverage of its early childhood care and education for indigenous children and children living in remote areas and ensure adequate resources for implementing bilingual models of education (Republic of Moldova);

26. Libraries in Australia have a long-established tradition of serving as informal learning facilities. One of the areas where they extend concerted efforts is literacy: ALIA estimations point to 121,000 story time initiatives for young children with 3.1 million participants in Australian libraries.³⁸ Other initiatives include ALIA National Simultaneous Storytime, with more than a million participants across Australia and New Zealand, the Children’s Book Council of Australia’s annual Children’s Book Week and the Australian Reading Hour, a collaboration between libraries, publishers, authors and booksellers. Early literacy is an important element of early childhood care and education, and keeping such services open ensures that there are fewer barriers for people from more vulnerable or marginalised backgrounds. Through ALIA, as a founder member, Australian libraries are among the key stakeholders of the National Early Language and Literacy Coalition, which works to develop a nation-wide approach to early literacy and language education.³⁹
27. Examples of early literacy initiatives dedicated to a specific group include the South Australian Public Library Network working with the Indigenous Literacy Foundation to deliver reading programmes – in both English and communities’ first language – to remote Aboriginal communities.⁴⁰ The State Library of Western Australia’s Better Beginnings family literacy program reaches 97% of all families with new born children, includes resources designed for children with disabilities such as braille reading material and includes targeted initiatives for remote aboriginal communities⁴¹.

RECOMMENDATION: We encourage further support and development of an enabling policy environment for inclusive early literacy initiatives, especially those supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, regional, and remote communities.

28. Australian libraries, through ALIA, have committed to promoting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development agreed by the United Nations’ 193 member states in 2015. The Sustainable Development Goals were included in the Objects of the Association in 2017 and an ALIA report of the same year brought together education, health, gender equality, business, innovation, community and partnership library initiatives to demonstrate the strength of this commitment.⁴²

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- ² Sue McKerracher, 2019, “Submission in response to the Senate Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy Discussion Paper”, Deakin, ACT: Australian Library and Information Association, <https://read.alia.org.au/submission-response-senate-inquiry-nationhood-national-identity-and-democracy-discussion-paper>.
- ³ ALIA, 2017, “Vote for a more sustainable future - ALIA AGM May”, <https://www.alia.org.au/news/15261/vote-more-sustainable-future-alia-agm-may>
- ⁴ Australian Library and Information Association, 2018, “ALIA core values policy statement”.
- ⁵ Australian Library and Information Association, 2019, “2019: A year in libraries”, <https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla.2019-year-in-libraries.pdf>.
- ⁶ B. Light et al., 2016, “The impact of libraries as creative spaces”, <https://content.plconnect.slq.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/SLQ-creativespacesreport-2016.pdf>.
- ⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census, <https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/2016>.
- ⁸ Indigenous Australian Languages, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/indigenous-australian-languages>, accessed 2 July 2020.
- ⁹ National edeposit, <https://ned.gov.au/ned/>.
- ¹⁰ The Hon Paul Fletcher MP, “\$8 million boost to enhance Australia’s Trove portal”, <https://minister.infrastructure.gov.au/fletcher/media-release/8-million-boost-enhance-australias-trove-portal>.
- ¹¹ “National Library of Australia's Trove service gets \$16.4 million in funding in MYEFO update”, 2016, ABC news, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-20/national-library-of-australia-gets-funding-for-trove-in-myefo/8136738>.
- ¹² “2019: A year in libraries”.

- ¹³ Australian Digital Inclusion Index, <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/>.
- ¹⁴ Australian Library and Information Association, 2018, “Submission in response to the Australian Human Rights Commission Human Rights and Technology Issues Paper”, <https://tech.humanrights.gov.au/submissions>.
- ¹⁵ Public Libraries Victoria, “Tech Savvy Seniors”, <https://www.publiclibrariesvictoria.net.au/tech-savvy-seniors>; see also IFLA, “Connecting Generations to Build Technology Skills at the Library”, 2018, <https://librarymap.ifla.org/stories/Australia/CONNECTING-GENERATIONS-TO-BUILD-TECHNOLOGY-SKILLS-AT-THE-LIBRARY/125>.
- ¹⁶ Telstra, Tech Savvy Seniors, <https://www.telstra.com.au/tech-savvy-seniors>.
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- ¹⁸ Reporters without borders, 2020, “Investigative journalism in danger”, <https://rsf.org/en/australia>.
- ¹⁹ The Sydney Morning Herald, 2019, “Campaign for the right to know fights the darkness”, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/campaign-for-the-right-to-know-fights-the-darkness-20191020-p532gq.html>.
- ²⁰ Department of Education, Skills and Employment - Ministers' Media Centre, 2019, “Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers”, <https://ministers.education.gov.au/tehan/independent-review-freedom-speech-australian-higher-education-providers-0>.
- ²¹ Universities Australia, 2019, “Uni Sector Reaffirms Its Longstanding Commitment To Foundational Freedoms”, <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/uni-sector-reaffirms-its-longstanding-commitment-to-foundational-freedoms/>.
- ²² Australian Library and Information Association, 2019, “ALIA submission in response to the Productivity Commission issues paper ‘The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health’, April 2019”, <https://read.alia.org.au/alia-submission-response-productivity-commission-issues-paper-%E2%80%98-social-and-economic-benefits>.
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- ²⁴ State Library Victoria, “Diversity and social inclusion action plan 2017–20”, https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Diversity_social_inclusion-FINAL_DX.PDF.
- ²⁵ ALIA, “Survey highlights how libraries combat loneliness”, <https://www.alia.org.au/news/21346/survey-highlights-how-libraries-combat-loneliness>.
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- ²⁷ “ALIA core values policy statement”.
- ²⁸ “2019: A year in libraries”.
- ²⁹ Australian Library and Information Association, 2019, “Improving library services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples”, https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/Indigenous%20collections%20and%20services%202019%20report_FINAL.pdf.
- ³⁰ State Library of Western Australia, 2016, “Storylines”, <https://www.slwa.wa.gov.au/explore-discover/indigenous-wa/storylines>.
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- ³⁵ “Discussion Paper - National Arts and Disability Strategy. An initiative of the Meeting of Cultural Ministers”, 2018, Commonwealth of Australia, https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/consultation/pdf/discussion_paper.pdf?acsf_files_redirect.
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- ³⁷ Australian Library and Information Association, 2019, “Submission in response to the Senate inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy discussion paper”, <https://read.alia.org.au/submission-response-senate-inquiry-nationhood-national-identity-and-democracy-discussion-paper>.
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³⁹ Australian Library and Information Association, 2019, “ALIA supports early literacy”,

<https://www.alia.org.au/news/19939/alia-supports-early-literacy>.

⁴⁰ “Indigenous collections and services”.

⁴¹ Better Beginnings, <https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/>.

⁴² Australian Library and Information Association, Australian Public Library Alliance, National and State Libraries Australia, 2018, “Australian Libraries Support the Sustainable Development Goals”, https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/Sustainable%20Development%20Goals%20report_screen.pdf.