



Submission from the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)

to the Productivity Commission Issues Paper on the Contribution of the Not for Profit Sector

Introduction

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the peak national body representing the library and information sector. It seeks to empower the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support. ALIA represents the interest of 6,000 members, the profession and Australia's 12 million library users.

<http://www.alia.org.au>

Australia's library and information sector is innovative, adaptable and collaborative. It has a well-qualified and trained workforce and is at the forefront of international practice. The Association and our members operate in a challenging world characterised by rapid social, economic and technological change, far-reaching changes in the information environment and challenges to the core value of the free flow of information and ideas.

The Association is established as a not for profit company limited by guarantee, governed by an elected Board of Directors. The Association's income comes mainly from membership fees and conferences. The Association is supported by a National Office based in Canberra.

ALIA has a well-developed member network of state, regional and sectoral groups who are the grassroots of the Association. These members are all volunteers who freely give their time and effort to support the goals of the Association by providing mutual support and professional development events.

MEASURING THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE NOT FOR PROFIT SECTOR

ALIA's roles

The draft overarching framework in the issues paper does not fully identify the several roles, outcomes and impacts delivered by membership-based organisations such as ALIA.

ALIA supports the valuable contribution made by our members and the library and information sector to families, communities, society, and the economy as a whole.

For example, Australia's public libraries build safer, stronger, sustainable communities; make citizens healthier; facilitate lifelong learning; assist people to find jobs; promote innovation; provide facilities and skills to expand the digital economy; and, contribute to prosperity.

Any measurement of ALIA's contribution as a not for profit professional association should recognise the roles as listed below.

Educational standards

ALIA supports the educational standards and professional development of its members and of the library and information community. Through our course accreditation program and PD scheme, Australia is provided with well-trained and current professionals.

Contribution to the government's agenda: social inclusion

ALIA supports our members who are working at the coalface to develop programs and activities that support social inclusion. Such programs include:

- outreach programs for Indigenous children as an introduction to early literacy and to give them a love of books via storytelling
- programs and resources for non-English speakers
- training for seniors in using the internet
- access to and assistance in using e-government resources
- providing services to people with a print disability.

Many studies have illustrated the vital role of libraries in providing services to unemployed people and those not in the labour force, people without access to a computer, and people living in the most disadvantaged areas.

In July 2009, ALIA will hold a Public Libraries Summit to demonstrate the many ways public libraries play a central and valued role in strengthening communities, developing people and achieving social inclusion.

A key goal of the ALIA Public Libraries Summit is to develop a stronger relationship with the Federal Government in achieving its agendas in a range of portfolios. Ideally, the country's 1,522 public libraries will be regarded as 'national champions' advancing social, educational, cultural, broadband and digital programs and policies.

Contribution to the government's agenda: democracy and citizenship

ALIA is strongly committed to values that underpin a democratic society and in promoting these values to its members, contributes to a stronger sense of citizenship and community contribution among its members and the library and information sector. ALIA's values include a respect for the diversity and individuality of all people, and excellence in professional service to our communities.

Contribution to the government's agenda: literacy

One of ALIA's core values is a commitment to literacy, information literacy and learning.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' report *Adult literacy and life skills survey*, found that 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.

ABS 4228.0 - *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, Summary Results, Australia, 2006

ALIA recognises the need to improve literacy skills, including information and computer literacy, so that all Australians can participate in our democratic society and digital environment. ALIA supports our members in achieving the skills to contribute to this economic infrastructure issue.

Contribution to the government's agenda: cybersafety

The Association is represented on the Cybersafety Working Group of the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy. ALIA has a strong interest in

cybersafety and the provision of internet access in public libraries, and has undertaken four surveys since 2002 on this issue. This provides the government with free evidence-based advice from the library and information sector.

Contribution to the government's policy development

ALIA provides submissions to government inquiries thereby contributing vital expert and evidence-based advice. ALIA's contribution leads to greater effectiveness of the government in the development of more informed public policy. ALIA's recent submissions have focussed on issues such as Australian infrastructure, e-health, health reform, ICT, ERA, extension of legal deposit, parallel importation of books, the digital economy and FOI reform.

Professional organisations such as ALIA also provide governments with a mechanism to communicate directly with the organisation's members, and ALIA assists by educating members on government programs. It is a cost-effective mechanism for government to gain views and feedback from members to inform its policy development and legislative processes.

Economic benefit

The recent New South Wales report on the value of public libraries states that:

Economic benefit, that is the financial amount saved relative to the cost of purchasing materials, was found to average \$325 per annum among surveyed library users. This aligned closely with a more structured estimate of a statewide benefit of \$1.216 billion, which equates to a benefit-cost ratio of 4.24 against the 2004-2005 investment of \$287 million. Thus for each dollar expended on public libraries, \$4.24 of economic benefit is generated.

Economic activity measures the contribution of public libraries to the economy in real terms and was estimated at \$810.2 million. Thus for each dollar expended on public libraries, \$2.82 of real economic activity is generated.

Library Council of New South Wales. *Enriching communities: the value of public libraries in New South Wales, March 2008.p i.*

Accurate, relevant and timely information is the key ingredient to effective decision-making. Australia's long-term economic development is dependent on its ability to use information to make decisions that enable growth, progress and productivity.

Advocacy

ALIA also undertakes policy development and advocacy activities on behalf of its members and the wider profession. The fundamental outcome for our advocacy is to promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy and democracy; and, to represent the interests of members to governments, other organisations and the community.

ALIA's membership of and representation on international bodies such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and its relationships with professional associations in other countries, means that our members are exposed to international trends and initiatives. Furthermore, Australia's reputation and that of its library community is enhanced through these international relationships and the sharing of successful programs and initiatives in Australia.

WAYS OF ENHANCING THE EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SECTOR

Communicating with government

There should be a more transparent way to contact key people and advisors in government departments so that not-for-profit organisations can ensure that their message is heard. This was also a key message that came out of the federal government's consultations on the development of a social compact.

Staffing and staff training

ALIA, as a not-for-profit professional association, is disadvantaged in attracting and retaining staff because of our inability to match public and private sector salaries, and it is an even greater challenge because of the National Office location in Canberra. A status similar to the PBI (Public Benevolent Institution) would be of great benefit to ALIA in attracting and retaining staff.

ALIA has a significant staff turnover and staff who leave take the skills, knowledge and experience they have gained at ALIA to other organisations, and often to the Australian public service.

The capacity of ALIA to offer ongoing staff training opportunities is limited and would be greatly enhanced if there was a discount available to not-for-profit organisations, especially through training agencies that are assisted financially by the government.

Donations

The Association's financial sustainability would be enhanced if tax deductible donations to a special fund or directly to the Association were facilitated. Currently the procedures for gaining tax deductibility for special funds are very restrictive.

Regulatory framework

As a company limited by guarantee, ALIA operates in a framework that has strict and significant regulatory requirements through ASIC. However, the documentation provided by ASIC is well structured and help is readily available.

TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

As identified in the Issues paper, the economic downturn has had an impact on the Association. While ALIA is a 'not-for-profit', we are also a 'not-for-loss'. Membership numbers have been declining over the past few years which is a trend reported by many other professional associations. The Association's income is mainly from membership fees so it is a challenge to sustain income levels and therefore service levels particularly when our second largest source of income, conferences, has been affected by the economic downturn.

SUMMARY

The Australian Library and Information Association is committed to an active policy of social inclusion and through its leadership, advocacy, education and professional development activities for and on behalf of its members, there is a well-educated library and information workforce whose contributions to libraries enhance the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of Australian society.

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