



Submission in response to the Australian Government Senate Inquiry into COVID-19

28 May 2020

1. About us

Australian Library and Information Association

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. On behalf of our 5,000 personal and institutional members, we provide 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.

ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance

The Australian Public Library Alliance is part of ALIA and represents the interests of the nation's 1500 public libraries. Offering books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, WiFi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, these libraries are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource.

- More than 9 million registered users in 2018 and more than 111 million visits to libraries, 51 million visits to library websites.
- More than 250,000 programs eg storytime, Be Connected, attracted over 7 million attendees.
- Per capita annual cost of \$48.99, funded by councils, state and territory governments.¹

Over the last 20 years, public libraries have increased their role in the digital space, enhancing people's online experiences, helping people connect to this new virtual world, and providing a safety net for those who are in danger of being left behind, particularly in terms of the ability to access government information.

Council of Australian University Librarians

The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) is the peak leadership organisation for university libraries in Australia. CAUL members are the University Librarians or equivalent of the 39 institutions that have representation on Universities Australia and the eight members of the Council of New Zealand University Librarians (CONZUL).

¹ <https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla-aus-public-library-stats-2017-18.pdf>

2. Libraries and COVID-19

Libraries have been highly agile, adapting and embracing new technologies, delivering online forums and making electronic resources widely available. As a sector, libraries have proved to be proactive and exceptionally resilient throughout the pandemic.

- We have taken a careful and considered approach to closing and reopening our physical spaces.
- We have introduced special measures to provide a clean, hygienic environment for staff and users; to quarantine and sanitise materials, and to enforce social distancing.
- We have proactively promoted existing online services and, where possible, we have adapted delivery models and moved our other services online.
- We have created new digital services and delivery mechanisms to make it easier for people to access what they need.
- We have maintained regular communication with our user groups and helped create and sustain a sense of community through the crisis.
- We have collaborated as a sector, sharing innovative ideas and best practice locally, nationally and internationally.
- We have monitored and reported these moves in order to inform our response to future events.

The federal government has focused on public libraries, yet these attributes apply equally to university libraries, TAFE libraries, school libraries, special libraries (health, law, government, corporate, heritage, arts, media) and the national, state and territory libraries.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, school, TAFE and university libraries have supported students and educators by enabling remote access to essential learning materials.

Health libraries have provided the very latest Coronavirus scientific research and advice to medical professionals.

Government library staff have been redeployed as information professionals working across their departments.

National, state and territory libraries have continued to support researchers with online access to their digitised and born-digital collections.

There are nine National, State and Territory Libraries, located in capital cities around Australia, attracting more than 9.5 million physical visitors each year, and holding collections valued at \$4.1 billion.² These libraries also have a high-profile online presence, with more than 47 million visits to their websites per annum, including visits to Trove, the National Library of Australia's collaborative platform, which involves a range of partners and contains a wealth of newspaper articles, journals, books, images and other cultural assets.³ Online collections include social media and

² <https://www.nsla.org.au/index.php/about>

³ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>

website archives collated in the National Library's PANDORA database, and NED (National EDeposit), a National, State and Territory Libraries initiative.⁴

3. Issues for libraries

3.1 Confusion of messaging

The federal government's focus on public libraries has led to a confusion of messaging for other types of libraries, as this contribution from CAUL indicates:

We want to thank the Australian Government for considering libraries in its response to-date, particularly when announcing steps to control the spread of COVID-19 and re-open Australia.

However, the inclusion of libraries has created challenges for university libraries. The Prime Minister's announcement on 24 March⁵ indicated that libraries, classified as non-essential institutions with no exceptions, were required to close in order to slow the spread of the virus. The announcement did not indicate to which kind of libraries these instructions applied.

This lack of clarity led to confusion among university libraries, many were unsure how the inclusion of 'libraries' in the announcement should be interpreted – were university libraries being instructed to close, despite their institutions being allowed to remain open? It resulted in inconsistent and uncoordinated closures, some libraries remained open, some closed, and many remained partially open in some capacity.

The announcement was also released without clear points of contact for enquiries. This made it difficult for universities to seek clarification from the Australian Government about whether the announcement applied to university libraries. Further announcements, including the Australian Government's recent 3-step plan for re-opening the economy on 8 May⁶ have continued to refer generally to libraries and do not provide any greater clarity as to which kind of libraries they refer.

Other examples include TAFE libraries, school libraries and joint use libraries, which are shared by school students and the community. In the latter case, in one state, the one joint use library run by council was closed completely, the other joint use libraries run by schools remained open for student use but were closed to the general public.

3.2 Recognition of libraries as essential service providers

The federal government announcement relating to prohibited venues on 24 March referred to 'Local government non-essential facilities and services (such as libraries and pools)'. This seeming dismissal of the role of libraries was reversed by the 8 May statement, which

⁴ <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/>

⁵ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/update-coronavirus-measures-24-March-2020>

⁶ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/update-coronavirus-measures-08may20>

referenced the reopening of public libraries as part of Step 1 of the roadmap to a COVIDSafe Australia.

Describing public libraries as 'non-essential' ignored the vital role they play in providing access to technology and the internet to some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in society, including homeless people. Without public libraries, individuals are denied critical access to Centrelink, MyGov and the latest health information. People without their own internet access lack the tools to update their resumes and apply for jobs, given that this is now almost an entirely online process.

The role of libraries in media literacy – helping people understand the difference between fake news and genuine information from credible, trusted and well-respected sources – was also underestimated. For many in our communities, libraries are the only place where they can access the internet and essential information resources. Universal access to quality online information should always be seen as essential, and never more so than during a pandemic.

The term 'non-essential' also ignored the role of public libraries in early literacy and assisting parents to be their child's first teacher. More than 125,000 storytimes in libraries each year attract over three million participants. When public libraries closed, teams recorded and livestreamed virtual storytime sessions to support parents at home with children not in formal education. Aside from local library activities and statewide library programs such as Better Beginnings in WA and First 5 Forever in Queensland, parents had very limited early education resources available to them.

Finally, the 'non-essential' label ignored the vital role public libraries play in combatting loneliness and fostering a sense of community cohesion.

The first 500 responses to an ALIA nationwide survey of library users in May found that, after book borrowing, social interaction has been the biggest loss felt by the community during the COVID-19 lockdown of public libraries. While 87% of respondents missed being able to borrow print books (ebooks remained available 24/7), 44% missed having expert, friendly help from library staff; 40% missed being around other people; 36% missed participating in events and activities for adults, and 20% missed taking part in storytimes with other families.

3.3 Access to ebooks

During the COVID-19 lockdown, electronic resources such as ebooks, eaudiobooks, online learning programs and databases were the only contact-free materials libraries could provide. Loans of ebooks were already on a growth trajectory in public libraries but soared during March and April. Use of other resources in libraries, such as Ancestry.Com for family history researchers, increased exponentially.

Since the 23 March shutdown, the State Library of NSW has enjoyed 703,611 website visits (20% increase) and 1,500 ebooks have been downloaded (200% increase). NSW

public libraries have collectively processed over 800,000 e loans (300% increase) and enjoyed over one million website visits (100% increase).⁷

Coming out of COVID-19, public and school libraries in particular need to find an affordable way of purchasing ebooks, which continues to reward creators and publishers but does not take unreasonable advantage of market supply limitations. For ebooks, libraries seek:

- Fair pricing – popular fiction titles can cost libraries several times the retail price
- Access to the latest releases (some publishers have embargo periods for libraries)
- Simple purchasing models (ebook contract models are overly complex and do not reflect the difference between ebooks and print and the positive benefits which can be derived from the digital format)
- Remote access for products such as Australian Standards
- Copyright provisions to be maintained in electronic formats rather than library exceptions being over-ridden by contract terms.

A 2019 survey of public libraries highlighted the top five priorities for improved access to ebooks:

1. Wider range of content (including Australian books and authors)
2. Better lending model conditions
3. Improved cost per use
4. Improved timeliness of release to libraries
5. Improved reporting.

3.4 Support for library workers

In a snapshot survey of libraries mid-May, ALIA found that 14% had had to stand staff down as a result of COVID-19, mainly casual workers, while other employees were faced with a reduction in hours.

The majority of library workers are employed by state, territory and local government, so JobKeeper payments were not relevant. We are concerned about the current situation for library workers who are experiencing financial hardship and about the future prospects for staff in all libraries.

4. Recommendations

From the issues noted above, we have four recommendations for the Senate Committee.

4.1 Ensure clarity of messaging for all libraries

We recognise that, while the federal government was able to provide leadership at a national level, it was not responsible for the implementation of the COVID-19 plan through

⁷ Percentage increases are compared to the same reporting period in 2019 (23 March to 15 May)

state and territory powers. We appreciate that, for the Commonwealth, there was not the time nor the opportunity for a nuanced approach for every industry and sector.

However, we recommend that future announcements relating to libraries in Australia be more specific about the type of libraries included or excluded and provide clear guidance for seeking clarity on instructions when the information is of a critical, time sensitive nature.

4.2 Invest in public libraries as a partner in the digital transformation of federal government services

In recent times, libraries have seen a big increase in demand for digital services. There is a very high level of trust in public libraries and librarians, which makes these institutions an attractive option even for the most sensitive of topics. Some people find their own way to libraries, for example to seek help filling in their tax form. Others are sent to public libraries by agencies for assistance filling in forms for welfare, immigration, NDIS and so on. This requires one-on-one help, which has a major impact on staffing levels, at the same time raising management issues around privacy of personal information.

With public libraries closed, the loss of internet access for people who can't afford to pay for their own, do not have the digital skills to navigate the internet, or have limited connectivity, has been evident during COVID-19. This has had a significant impact on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in our society. Public libraries are especially well positioned to play an instrumental role in addressing emerging vulnerabilities and are essential if all Australians are to have access to the internet.

In the US, the Library Services and Technology Act is a federal program exclusively for libraries, with funds distributed through a grants scheme to support digitally-enabled communities. We propose that, coming out of COVID-19, the Australian Government create a fund in Australia to recognise the contribution of local government-funded public libraries in enabling its services to be provided online, at a reduced cost centrally.

4.3 Improve access to ebooks and other electronic resources

As founder members and active participants in the Australian Libraries Copyright Committee (ALCC), ALIA and CAUL endorse the separate submission made to this Inquiry by the ALCC, which highlights ways in which the federal government can improve digital access by further updating Australia's copyright legislation.

4.4 Explore the role of libraries in supporting the federal government's JobMaker scheme

Post Covid-19, libraries are well positioned to actively support and facilitate workforce development and training.

- Public libraries can work with higher education and government agencies to help people gain the skills and confidence they need to return to the workforce, through guided access to online and real world training.
- Public libraries provide service access points for federal government workforce services, as well as resources for job seekers.

- The federal Department of Education can urge state and territory government equivalents to ensure school libraries are supported, as they play an important role in ensuring literacy skills are developed for vocational education as well as university preparation, and to invest in TAFE libraries, as they help older students with study resources, technology and information literacy.

5. In conclusion

Libraries are uniquely placed to support good economic, social and digital inclusion outcomes. There are millions of Australians who will need our support through the recovery process including students, job seekers, creatives and small businesses from an economic inclusion perspective; the homeless, the lonely, and people needing free and equitable access to public space from the social inclusion perspective.

The library brand is strong and trusted, our networks, both digital and physical, are well established and efficient, our workforces are adaptable and innovative, we have a deep and meaningful connection with our communities, and we are keen to support the national recovery effort.

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