

# Submission to the parliamentary inquiry into Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions

21 October 2020

## About us

National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA) is the peak body for Australia's national, state and territory libraries, with a collaboration dating back to 1973. Our nine libraries hold rich collections that serve the education, research, innovation and cultural needs of Australians every day.

NSLA supports submissions by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), members of the GLAM Peak collective, and the Australian Libraries Copyright Committee (ALCC).

This submission considers all five terms of reference.

## Economic benefits and employment opportunities

The economic benefits and employment opportunities delivered by libraries go far beyond visitor numbers and our own workforce.

Together, the nine libraries within the NSLA collaboration employ over 2,000 staff and work with hundreds of community volunteers each year onsite and online – but this is just one component of our contribution to employment and to the Australian economy.

The role of libraries as free, public spaces for discovery and access to information – in person and online – is especially important now as Australians contend with a radically different job market, a creative sector in recovery, new channels for learning and teaching, a demand for invention and entrepreneurship, and new forms of entertainment and social connection.

NSLA libraries support entrepreneurship through dedicated programs and facilities such as The Edge at the State Library of Queensland, and State Library Victoria's StartSpace – which hosted the *Future Founders Festival* for international students, innovators and founders during Melbourne's lockdown in September 2020. We support job seekers at a fundamental level by providing internet access and resources, as well as public programs in digital literacy and language skills.

NSLA libraries support tens of thousands of secondary and tertiary students on their way to employment by providing free resources, expertise and study spaces. We offer dozens of fellowships and grants every year to cultivate new research and creative endeavours that draw on the unique collections in our care.

Beyond education, our contribution to economic industries such as tourism is strategic but unfunded. NSLA libraries are tourist destinations in their own right, attracting 9.5 million visitors to our buildings last year. In 2018 State Library Victoria was awarded Gold in Cultural Tourism at the RACV Victorian Tourism Awards for the second year in a row; following with Gold in 2019 for Outstanding Contribution by Volunteers.

Studies using Return on Investment (ROI) methods in Australia and overseas shared by the International Federation of Library Associations<sup>1</sup> have repeatedly shown that libraries deliver far more to the economy than they receive in funding. A recent independent report by SGS Economics and Planning (2018) showed a return of \$4.30 for every dollar spent on public libraries in Victoria.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> IFLA (2020), 'Library Return on Investment – Review of Evidence from the Last 10 Years', <https://www.ifla.org/node/93197>

<sup>2</sup> SGS Economics and Planning (2018), *Libraries Work! The socio-economic value of public libraries to Victorians*, [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/519d29\\_b2c87818b8ef4491be8dde83b1f1c227.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/519d29_b2c87818b8ef4491be8dde83b1f1c227.pdf)

We know that properly resourced library programs for job seekers, along with resources and opportunities for students and professionals, contribute to the economy well beyond their cost. We also know that affordable tertiary pathways for library graduates today are essential if sustainable library services are to be delivered to future generations.

## Community, social wellbeing and national identity

One of NSLA's three strategic priorities is 'strengthening community identity'.

Libraries are much more than repositories of information. They are sites of learning, discovery, creativity, community, and public debate. They are trusted institutions.

Because libraries are free and open to all, providing services and programs designed for their communities, they are vital contributors to community identity and social wellbeing. Programs range from Storytime for children and school programs aligned with the curriculum, to family and community history workshops, public lecture series, exhibitions, and festivals of writing and ideas.

Social outcomes associated with participation in arts and cultural activities have been measured over many years<sup>3</sup> and include benefits to health, education, cultural connection, community cohesion, and personal wellbeing.

National, state and territory libraries play a very particular additional role in that we have a legislated mandate to collect Australia's documentary heritage, including published works (print, electronic and websites) and unpublished materials such as oral histories, personal papers, music and photographs. Building these collections means building relationships with communities and community leaders, ensuring that they are part of the Australian story.

All NSLA libraries are members of the Trove discovery platform<sup>4</sup>, which reaches over 20 million Australians every year, with collection use recorded as being in direct proportion to the geographic distribution of the population.

At the recent Senate hearing on issues facing diaspora communities, NSLA made the case for libraries as welcoming places that offer a wealth of multilingual services for community groups and play an important bridging role between governments and diaspora communities. NSLA has also embarked upon an extensive program to ensure that our libraries are culturally safe public spaces and workplaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visitors and staff – places in which they are able to confidently draw strength in their identity, culture and community.

We can measure community engagement by assessing uptake of programs and services, and assessing the diversity of our collections, our audiences and our workforce. Improving community engagement starts with consciously including community members in every aspect of library operations, ensuring representation in leadership positions and decision-making bodies.

There is no doubt that the events of 2020 have shifted the benchmarks for the economic and non-economic benefits of our creative and cultural industries, and our cultural institutions will need to work together to establish new ways of measuring our impact.

## Delivery of policy between layers of government

The library sector already works effectively across layers of government.

The library sector works effectively, cooperatively, and on a largely shared policy agenda across the federal, state/territory, and local government levels. Many state and territory libraries are directly responsible for providing local library services, while others manage funding and development programs for public library services in their

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<sup>3</sup> Examples include the WA Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries' *Social Impacts of Culture and the Arts WA* (2019) <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019-08/apo-nid258661.pdf>; Creative Victoria's *Creative Impact Framework* (2019) <https://creative.vic.gov.au/research/creative-impact-framework/economic-impact>; State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network with the Victorian Government, *Creative Communities: The cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* (2014) [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/1f8737\\_7d82ceb7e0384ddc8588bbf64567cece5.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/1f8737_7d82ceb7e0384ddc8588bbf64567cece5.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>

state. Trove – with its almost 1,000 contributing institutions and organisations – already exemplifies a platform that provides value to governments at every level.

NSLA believes that strengthening and leveraging existing mechanisms such as these is preferable to trying to create new mechanisms, and would be happy to discuss opportunities to do so.

## Impact of Covid-19

Covid-19 has pushed us to revolutionise service delivery for libraries to meet public need within a very constrained budget environment, while collecting Australian stories of the pandemic for posterity.

The consequences of Covid-19 for NSLA libraries include an exponential increase in the use of digital resources; a drastic reduction in onsite visitation; an interruption to business processes with many staff working from home for long periods; and a sudden demand for new digital infrastructure and staff skills within a decreasing budget. Within this climate, we have also had to fulfil our responsibility to ‘collect’ Australia’s experience of the pandemic quickly, creatively – and for the most part, remotely.

Library membership soared in 2020 as Australians sought access to free, high quality collections, programs, teaching resources and events during periods of lockdown and home schooling. By mid-2020, NSLA libraries had answered 196,000 research enquiries. Digital audiences tripled for both the National Library of Australia and State Library of New South Wales, with a similar surge recorded in other state libraries.

The pandemic has had the positive effect of vastly improved access to resources for regional and remote communities, for Australians with a disability, and for those unable to travel far from home. Formerly onsite-only programs or services have shifted online, or are offered in both modes, and many publishers have extended remote access to subscription-based resources. Now that this precedent has been set, there will be – and should be – an expectation of continued access for these communities.

This increase in demand has proven beyond doubt the importance of libraries to the Australian public and the value placed upon our services and collections, but it has also exposed cracks in digital infrastructure and forced rapid reskilling or reallocation of permanent staff.

The degree of technological sophistication and capital funding required to meet public demand will be difficult to reach – in many cases impossible – as budget restrictions come into place as part of the Covid-19 recovery period. The dangers of an overreliance on earned revenue for cultural institutions have been highlighted as libraries continue to operate with limited visitor numbers and fundraising opportunities, and face revenue losses from onsite businesses such as cafés and bookshops.

We must recognise the uniqueness of Australia’s cultural heritage as something to be preserved and sustained. The United Kingdom’s Culture Recovery Fund of £1.57 billion, announced in July 2020, represents the UK Government’s largest single investment into the cultural and heritage sector with the aim of ‘safeguarding nationally significant cultural and heritage organisations’ at risk.<sup>5</sup> Our heritage is irreplaceable, and warrants investment on this scale.

## Innovation and the digital environment

NSLA libraries recorded over 60 million visits to our websites in 2019-2020. We have a history of shared digital content delivery.

NSLA libraries have a strong track record in shared digital systems, culminating in the launch of the National eDeposit service (NED) in 2019 – a world-first system for collecting, preserving and providing access to Australian electronic publications under legal deposit legislation. This service enabled the uninterrupted collection of Australian electronic publications throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

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<sup>5</sup> Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) for Arts Council England, *The impact of the Cultural Recovery Fund on the Arts and Culture sector* (October 2020), <https://cebr.com/>

NSLA libraries' experience of 2020 has vindicated the move toward stronger collaboration in the digital environment. We are seeing more opportunities and a greater willingness to work with each other and with other Australian cultural institutions in collaborative collecting, shared programming, joint research, and shared discovery platforms.

Already, our libraries are experts in public engagement through digital platforms. Our online programs and public events receive thousands of viewers. Hundreds of volunteers work with Trove<sup>6</sup> to tag collection items and correct digitised newspaper text in their own time. Innovations such as the State Library of Queensland's Corley Explorer tool are enabling crowd-sourced content to be incorporated into online platforms.

To meet public expectations and provide the fullest possible access to collections, NSLA libraries must have the technology and expertise for production of timely, professional programs; for continued digitisation of large multi-format collections; for digital preservation and emulation of older formats; for discovery platforms that are easy to navigate and appealing to use; and for the kinds of collaborative efforts that will result in greater cost efficiencies and a better user experience – including the urgent replacement of infrastructure for the collection and accessibility of Australian web archives.

Libraries have always been innovators – inhibited only by resources and legislation. The OECD report, *Culture shock: COVID-19 and the cultural and creative sectors* (September 2020)<sup>7</sup> recognised Australia's government policy response in employment support but found gaps here in funding for 'structural policies' including digitisation and digitalisation, innovation, and changes to copyright licensing. These are the changes needed if we are to increase access and opportunities for Australia's creative and cultural industries, and to facilitate creativity and innovation in the community in turn.

NSLA libraries and our cultural sector colleagues have the systems and the networks in place to leverage this kind of policy and financial support for the benefit of all Australians.

## Recommendations

We close our submission with three primary recommendations:

1. Federal funding for joint digital infrastructure for cultural institutions to collect, preserve and open access to Australia's cultural heritage – see also: submission from the GLAM Peak group.
2. Provision of affordable pathways for students undertaking library and information studies – see also: submission from the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA).
3. Implementation of changes to the Copyright Act to facilitate open access to our cultural heritage – see also: submission from the Australian Libraries Copyright Committee (ALCC).

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<sup>6</sup> Similar activities underway at other NSLA libraries, e.g: <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/statelibrarynsw/miles-franklins-diaries-1952-54> and <https://www.libraries.tas.gov.au/how-to/Pages/volunteer-online.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> OECD, *Culture shock: COVID-19 and the cultural and creative sectors* (Sept 2020) <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/>