

Wednesday, 15 May 2024

RE: Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into Civics Education, Engagement and Participation in Australia

National and State Libraries Australasia Inc. (NSLA) welcomes the Joint Standing Committee's Inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia. NSLA comprises Australia's national, state and territory libraries and their networks, who are among the most trusted public institutions in this country.¹ This influence allows libraries to play a critical role in enabling civics education, engagement and participation in Australian democratic processes.

Libraries enable democratic engagement and participation through the provision of free and equitable access to knowledge and a commitment to the ideals of universal education.² What is explicitly listed as a strategic priority at one NSLA member, "connecting people to information,"³ is true of the mission and purpose of every member library.

Australia's national, state and territory libraries, their online presence, and their networks are uniquely positioned to be trusted partners in ensuring equitable access to civics education and to relevant, authoritative, and culturally suitable information about Australia as a democracy. NSLA libraries acknowledge and respect Australia's first peoples as the original and continuing custodians of this land, and recognise the importance of their role in helping to blend old and new societal structures.

In making this submission, NSLA highlights the role of national, state and territory libraries in contributing to the following:

1. Equitable access to civics education; and opportunities for supporting culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities to access relevant, appropriate, and culturally suitable information

NSLA member libraries enable free and inclusive access to knowledge, news and information, in print and online,⁴ about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting, to promote full electoral participation.

Central to the values of our libraries is freedom of expression and speech, and promoting critical and creative thinking to take into consideration diverse points of view. Our reading rooms are stocked daily with major national and international newspapers, both in print and digital editions, and users are encouraged to discover

¹ See State Library of New South Wales, [Library as community place | State Library of New South Wales \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.slv.nsw.gov.au/library-as-community-place).

² For example, see the State Library of Queensland Strategic Plan 2023-2027 ([SLQ STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-2027 WEB 0.pdf](https://www.slv.qld.gov.au/strategic-plan-2023-2027)), and the State Library of Victoria Strategic Plan 2022-26 ([Strategic Plan 2022-26.pdf \(slv.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/strategic-plan-2022-26)).

³ Libraries Tasmania Strategic Directions 2022-2024 ([Strategic Directions 2022-2024 - Our priorities \(libraries.tas.gov.au\)](https://www.libraries.tas.gov.au/strategic-directions-2022-2024)).

⁴ See for example, Libraries Tasmania Strategic Directions 2022-2024 ([Strategic Directions 2022-2024 - Our priorities \(libraries.tas.gov.au\)](https://www.libraries.tas.gov.au/strategic-directions-2022-2024)).

these rich collections: for example, via an online 'Newsworthy' workshop users learn how to navigate these extensive collections.⁵

Because of libraries, Australians can remain connected to the digital sphere regardless of socioeconomic status. Online engagement is essential for civic engagement and participation in the modern age, and libraries have evolved to become hubs for digital engagement, democratising access to the digital sphere.⁶ Free access to computers, tablets and public WiFi are available in every NSLA library. NSLA libraries value the importance of supporting "digital inclusion and [encouraging] social engagement by providing access to modern technologies and spaces for independent and group study,"⁷ which may include offering informal and social learning opportunities and resources for school-age and tertiary students, families, and community learners of all generations.

Libraries recognise that many Australians access information and opinions about current affairs and contemporary issues from social media platforms, and use our own contributions to these platforms to provide links to our collections and other sources of authoritative information.

2. Mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information; mechanisms available to assist voters in understanding the legitimacy of information; and mechanisms to improve the quality of information

The library sector is committed to promoting the development of a media literate citizenry capable of understanding and evaluating the legitimacy of information. Our libraries are staffed with qualified library and information professionals who are available to answer questions, locate information, and to contextualise publications and other resources. NSLA is a founding member of the Australian Media Literacy Alliance (AMLA), which seeks to develop a media literate society. NSLA has welcomed the opportunity to make submissions to government in support of media literacy initiatives recently.⁸ NSLA recommends that the Australian Government engage directly with AMLA to develop and implement a National Media Literacy Strategy and continues to advocate for Government support of the crucial service that libraries provide in this space.

Governments can prevent or limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes by guaranteeing robust and continued investment in institutions and programs that promote media literacy, including those in the library sector. This is essential, as one NSLA member library summarises: "public discourse and knowledge-sharing is almost entirely digital and increasingly owned by private interests [...] the validity of information and truth is hotly contested."⁹ National, state and territory libraries are not only trusted and effective mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information, but have also established themselves as vital mechanisms through which a media-literate public is developed. Libraries do this by providing authoritative information via engaging collections and communications, programming, events and exhibitions about electoral matters, the impact of artificial intelligence, foreign interference, social media and

⁵ See [Newsworthy \(slv.vic.gov.au\)](https://slv.vic.gov.au)

⁶ 'An analysis of digital safety net and service costing for public libraries,' unpublished report commissioned for Libraries ACT, prepared by Schools of Information & Communication Studies and Library, Charles Sturt University, April 2024, 2.

⁷ State Library of South Australia, 'Future Directions Towards 2030,' [SLSA-Future-Directions-Towards-2030.pdf](#).

⁸ For example, 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Influence of International Digital Platforms, March 2023,' [NSLA-ALIA-submission-intl-digital-platforms-March23.pdf](#)

⁹ State Library of Victoria Strategic Plan 2022-26, [Strategic Plan 2022-26.pdf \(slv.vic.gov.au\)](#).

mis- and disinformation, and how governments and the community can prevent or limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes.

NSLA member libraries provide digital resources, accessible to anyone in the world, that promote diligent enquiry into the legitimacy of information consumed. For example, the National Library of Australia's 'Digital Classroom' provides free access to resources for educators teaching media literacy.¹⁰ In November 2024, the NSLA Learning Network will be hosting an online symposium for educators throughout the country focusing on media literacy, underpinned by critical and creative thinking.

3. **Helping Australians be better informed about, and better participate in, the electoral system**

To encourage active and informed participation in the electoral system, it is vital that all Australians understand their personal investment in that system, and see themselves reflected in it. The success of Australia's civic processes depends on the engagement of all Australians.

As institutions with legal mandates to collect all publications, irrespective of content or authorship, NSLA member libraries have a unique role to play in reflecting back to the public the most diverse understanding of what it means to 'be Australian' and to be both player and beneficiary in Australia's civic process. NSLA member libraries believe that, through our collections, "we come to understand the thoughts that built our society, that challenged it and that continue to change it,"¹¹ and that these collections "[enrich] our understanding about who we are and our place in the world."¹² Another member notes that libraries are vital in "providing a sense of belonging."¹³ Examples of these collections being effectively used as resources in civics education include a retrospective on the 1967 Referendum '50 years on', and resources promoting understanding of Australians' 'rights and freedoms'.¹⁴ A NSLA member library offers resources targeted toward understanding 'legal studies, civics and citizenship'.¹⁵ It is known that libraries are a destination for people of non-English language speaking backgrounds seeking information.¹⁶

NSLA member libraries play a significant role contributing to Australians being better informed about the electoral system by documenting the process itself. NSLA libraries are repositories of a comprehensive archive of Australian political material available in print and online: for example, one NSLA library holds collectibles and t-shirts from the 2007 'Kevin 07' federal campaign.¹⁷ The Australian interested in studying past political movements has access to these collections; teachers and parents introducing younger Australians to the democratic process can do so with tangible items of Australian history at their fingertips. These collections also promote interrogation and introspection on the evolving narrative of what it means to 'be' Australian, and times in which the civic process has disenfranchised, misled, or empowered Australians.

¹⁰ National Library of Australia, [Themes - Media and Information Literacy | National Library of Australia \(nla.gov.au\)](https://nla.gov.au/themes-media-and-information-literacy)

¹¹ State Library of South Australia, 'Future Directions Towards 2030,' [SLSA-Future-Directions-Towards-2030.pdf](https://slsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/SLSA-Future-Directions-Towards-2030.pdf)

¹² National Library of Australia Corporate Plan, 2023-24, [nla-corporate-plan-2023-2024.pdf](https://nla.gov.au/nla-corporate-plan-2023-2024.pdf)

¹³ State Library of Western Australia Strategic Plan 2023-27, [Strategic Plan 2023-2027 web.pdf \(slwa.wa.gov.au\)](https://slwa.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/Strategic_Plan_2023-2027_web.pdf)

¹⁴ State Library of Western Australia, [Right Wrongs \(dlgsc.wa.gov.au\)](https://dlgsc.wa.gov.au/right-wrongs); State Library of New South Wales, [Rights and freedoms | State Library of New South Wales \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://nsw.gov.au/rights-and-freedoms).

¹⁵ State Library of Queensland, [Legal studies, civics and citizenship resources | State Library Of Queensland \(slq.qld.gov.au\)](https://slq.qld.gov.au/legal-studies-civics-and-citizenship-resources).

¹⁶ 'An analysis of digital safety net and service costing for public libraries,' unpublished report commissioned for Libraries ACT, prepared by Schools of Information & Communication Studies and Library, Charles Sturt University, April 2024, 6.

¹⁷ See 'Kevin Rudd Collection 2007,' https://onsearch.slq.qld.gov.au/permalink/61SLQ_INST/taqf2h/alma99266503402061



Conclusion

The contribution of Australia's national, state and territory libraries and their networks in sustaining civics education, engagement and participation in Australia is significant and vital. NSLA commends the important work of our member libraries and the wider library sector to the Committee.

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