Responses to COVID-19 in Australia's national, state and territory libraries

November 2020

Executive summary

This is an extract of a report prepared for the nine member libraries of NSLA – Australia's national, state and territory libraries. It presents a descriptive analysis of NSLA libraries' responses to the COVID-19 state-of-emergency declarations, and is intended to support future disaster management planning.

The full report was based on interviews with senior staff in corporate services, visitor experience and public programs, as well as staff surveys and reports generated by member libraries. The report applies to only the first seven months of 2020. It is a 'point in time' analysis of a dynamic situation that will continue to evolve.

Responding to COVID-19 presented multiple and unparalleled challenges to business continuity for every NSLA library, from building closures and lockdowns, transitioning staff to remote work, and shifting operations to digital first delivery platforms, followed by the gradual and strictly controlled reopening of spaces and services operating under a hybrid business model.

Key findings

- NSLA libraries' experiences during COVID-19 are influencing an expanded or holistic approach to contingency planning, in addition to 'just-in-time' and 'just-in-case' responses to business continuity risks. This includes short-term risks (such as climate-related events) that see a return to the status quo alongside longer-term outlier risks, such as a pandemic, which deliver fundamental changes to the business model, in this case hybrid operations.

- The rapidly enforced and lengthy building closures, which introduced the beginning of hard and soft lockdowns in March 2020, may well have been beyond the experience of any individual or institution, but as a logistical exercise was not particularly difficult to achieve. Some libraries used this opportunity to fast-track building maintenance and upgrades, weeding and stocktake of collections, and reorganisation of spaces and collections.

- By contrast, transitioning the majority of staff to a distributed work environment was an intense exercise. The timeframe required to achieve transition was relative to previous investment in digital capacity (technology and training) for staff. Libraries that had already converted to, and provided training in, collaborative software and/or used portable devices instead of desktop PCs were initially better prepared for this transition. Others would need to fast track and would use this experience to continue to grow their digital capacity to support a remote, mobile workforce.

- Visible, authoritative leadership was critical to the management of the pandemic crisis, particularly during the early stages as many staff were facing stress related to pre-existing environmental challenges, including climate-related disasters, organisational change, building renovations and collection moves. The lockdown orders added yet another level of anxiety around employment and health. NSLA libraries quickly adopted a range of actions to alleviate this stress, ranging from

targeted work projects, online training and wellbeing programs to special leave or salary support. These activities were designed to support all staff and ensure a sense of purpose and connection.

- Staff wellbeing has emerged as a major issue during remote work and will require continued due diligence in the years to come. Regular information updates on library operations and the status of COVID-19 would also be an extremely important channel to support staff, with many CEOs making the most of video technologies and platforms to deliver a more personalised 'one to many' message.

- The wholesale transition to remote work demonstrated, in contrast to prevailing opinion, that there was little difference in productivity between a distributed or onsite workforce. The NSLA workforce proved to be highly resilient, innovative and willing to adapt for the good of the organisation. The challenge will be to maintain and channel these benefits to support broader cultural change.

- Once settled into working-from-home (WFH) arrangements, NSLA staff have realised benefits in terms of flexibility and work-life balance which many are keen to maintain. Despite accepting that WFH will inform working arrangements in the future, only a few NSLA libraries have embarked on formalising this within employment policy frameworks.

- NSLA libraries have long prioritised a digital-first approach in a large part of their operations, particularly collection development, which enabled these to continue uninterrupted throughout the lockdown. There was, however, a distinct and significant shift to digital delivery platforms for onsite programming, with the exception of volunteer programs, which have remained on hold throughout 2020. This was initially a difficult transition as few libraries had engaged in the delivery of online programs. A number of programming staff felt compromised by the pressure for a quick turnaround to develop quality products, while many were simultaneously trying to learn new skillsets.

- Online programming has greatly extended audience reach, achieving numbers that would be impossible onsite. Despite no immediate intention to realign resourcing to meet increased demand, there is a recognition that this is a highly competitive market and that future resourcing for onsite and online programming will need to take into account audience demand and the effects of COVID-19. Program evaluation will need to incorporate new and existing metrics to develop a comprehensive understanding of what drives and attracts online audiences and how this differs from onsite behaviour. Early anecdotal evidence suggests that digital delivery is not effective for all types of programming.

- Online demand for collection materials appears to have peaked during April before plateauing, in most cases, in the following months, in line with the reopening of library spaces and services and the easing of restrictions across the broader community. Online demand has, however, remained at significantly higher levels than previous years' projections, which reflects the change in user behaviour – a preference for online services – occurring in all sectors.

- Libraries have acknowledged the immediate financial impact of COVID-19 on both revenue and expenditure has been difficult, and while currently managing the shift to online delivery within existing resources, a number of libraries expect a rebalancing of onsite and online services may see a realignment at some future stage.

- The reopening of spaces and services occurred in a staged process from mid-June onwards. Like the transition to remote work, reopening has been a massive project for each library, requiring extensive cross-divisional input to meet government requirements for a COVID-safe site. It is also a process that has benefited from collaboration across NSLA libraries, including consultation with peers on an individual and group basis. The Visitor Experience Network, for example, has performed a critical role in developing solutions to deliver COVID-safe sites for visitors and staff.

- In most cases, libraries have reported significantly lower numbers of visitors returning onsite than social distancing requirements allow, attributed to Victoria's second-wave lockdown as well as jurisdictional spikes in the community.

Conclusions

New forms of collaboration

The ability to tap into information from individuals, advisory groups and networks to benchmark and problem-solve during the COVID-19 period has been incredibly valuable. This degree of trust and willingness to collaborate is NSLA's greatest strength.

NSLA libraries now have opportunities to work collaboratively in new areas as a result of the shift to online programming, increased connection with local audiences, the likelihood of an increased demand for digital experiences onsite as audiences become more comfortable with online interaction, and the move to activate outdoor spaces as a way to continue programming in line with social distancing requirements.

Workforce changes

The long-tail impact of COVID-19 is likely to change the structure and makeup of the library workforce, with increased attention given to areas such as cybersecurity, advanced data analytics, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and robotics. The declining trend for reference support may also shift more resourcing into the development and curation of online content.

NSLA libraries may be able to take advantage of workforce mobility to support a shared approach to skill and resourcing gaps, a solution to scarce human capital that has had little application to date in the library sector. Technology will continue to drive these changes, resulting in a continuing, if not increasing, tension between the ethics of librarianship (copyright, privacy and data protection) and the power of technology.

A boost for advocacy

COVID-19 increased the political visibility of all NSLA libraries, particularly during the peak outbreak period in April. Importantly, NSLA's political visibility has not diminished in recent months, as evidenced in invitations to present to Senate hearings for the inquiry into issues facing diaspora communities (14 October) and the inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy (13 November 2020).

The current amendment proposals for the *Copyright Act 1968 (Cth)* also reflect an acknowledgment of the significant role the library sector played to support public access to content during COVID-19. The amendments are framed to support the public interest and will benefit libraries. Importantly, there is interest in introducing the capacity for libraries to undertake mass digitisation of orphan works using a 'reasonably diligent search' model.

Although most NSLA libraries are expecting a reduction in recurrent budgets resulting from COVID-19 in the coming years, some are hopeful that COVID-19 will lead to improved funding. The experience of COVID-19 in public libraries, and the usage statistics for NSLA collections and services, have proven beyond doubt that libraries are an essential service for Australians.