



Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

Submission from: Electronic Resources Australia (ERA)

Signed by:

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**ACCESS BY ALL AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS TO A CORE COLLECTION
OF AUTHORITATIVE DIGITAL INFORMATION**

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Introduction

This submission has been prepared by Electronic Resources Australia (ERA), a consortium of more than 1200 Australian libraries, including 650 school libraries. ERA is coordinated by the National Library of Australia on the advice of representatives of the various library sectors, including school libraries.

ERA supports collaborative subscription by libraries to electronic information resources, usually abbreviated as “e-resources”. E-resources include electronic journals, e-books, encyclopedias and other types of information content available online. They are now an essential component of the collections which libraries provide to their users because of the need for Australians to have access to up to date quality information. They allow for Australians to have access from wherever they are, without the delays involved in placing requests or visiting the library in person. In the school context, e-resources represent a vital part of the learning resources which school libraries offer to students.

This submission will mainly address the fifth term of reference: “the impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians”. However, comments will be made on some of the other terms of reference.

Preliminary comments

In an era of the Internet and ever-expanding electronic services, direct and immediate access to online information is fundamental to a well-informed society, and also to the learning experience at all levels of education. While much online information is freely available on the Internet, a great deal of authoritative information is provided by publishers and information aggregators on a subscription basis. Libraries play a key role in subscribing to these e-resources and in providing them to library users.

Despite these efforts, there remain many Australians who do not have access to reliable and authoritative online information simply because the library with which they are affiliated does not have the IT or financial capacity to subscribe to such resources. Even when available, access to these resources is often limited to library premises as a license condition and they are not available for use in the home, school or workplace.

The National Library of Australia has indicated that it will work to achieve a situation in which every Australian can access a core set of e-resources, free to that user but paid for by his or her library, this being assisted where possible by Government funding.

This issue was highlighted in the 2003 report of the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee entitled *Libraries in the Online Environment*. One of the key recommendations of this report was:

Recommendation 9. (a) That the National Library of Australia identify a number of key databases for which national site licencing might be desirable; and (b) that additional Australian Government funding be extended to the National Library of Australia for this purpose.

The Government's response to the report (June 2004) rejected this recommendation on the grounds that it was the responsibility of other levels of Government.

Following this rejection, the National Library worked with a group of library sectoral representatives to develop a self-funded strategy. The result was the establishment of Electronic Resources Australia (ERA) which manages consortial purchasing arrangements that make it more affordable for Australian libraries to purchase these products, with the ultimate goal of achieving national access. Due to licence conditions negotiated by ERA, access to these e-resources is not only available in participating libraries but also offsite by registered users of those libraries.

In New Zealand, a similar library consortium (EPIC - Electronic Purchasing In Collaboration) provides free access by schools to a significant set of e-resources from five providers, as a result of funding by the Ministry of Education.

Through a competitive tender process, ERA has selected a core set of products which represent the best value-for-money available in the market. ERA has developed a panel of 25 products in the areas of 'Australian News & Business', 'General Reference', 'Health Information', 'Humanities & Social Sciences', and 'Science & Technology'.

Over 1200 libraries now purchase at least one core set product through ERA. Notwithstanding the success of ERA the original issue remains: many Australians do not have access to reliable and authoritative online information. In the absence of central funding it is unlikely that national access will be achieved to any of the core set products.

Term of Reference 1:

The impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities

The Australian Government's Digital Education Revolution (DER) program aims "to contribute sustainable and meaningful change to teaching and learning in Australian schools that will prepare students for further education, training and to live and work in a digital world".

This program has encouraged the development of learning models which involve the delivery of information in an online format to the student's desktop. School libraries can play a leading role in this process, but their ability to do so is constrained by the lack of any additional funding to support activities such as the evaluation and selection of online databases. This activity requires an analysis on a school by school basis of teacher librarians' teaching and learning requirements as well as an analysis of the available databases against curriculum need. Currently this is beyond the scope of most schools and teacher librarians.

The Building the Education Revolution (BER) program is funding the development of many new primary school library buildings. However, the investment required to support school library services extends to information service provision and curriculum resources. On the current decentralised funding model this investment will have to be sourced from other parts of an already stretched school budget. For more information see the ASLA Media Release of 7 April 2010, entitled *New school library buildings are springing up all over Australia - but how will they be staffed?* (<http://www.asla.org.au/advocacy/mediarelease-April2010.htm>)

ERA welcomes the improved online access that will be offered through the National Broadband Network.

Term of Reference 2:**The future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy**

ERA supports the proposition that teacher librarians play a major role in the development of students' research and information literacy. The development of these literacy skills supports the students' future participation in the Australian economy and society. ERA draws attention to the research evidence that students attain higher levels of achievement when there is an adequately resourced school library staffed by a teacher librarian.

There are a number of closely related literacies, including information literacy, critical literacy, ICT literacy and digital literacy. Given the importance of online resources, teacher librarians can play a crucial role in supporting both students and teachers to maximise the benefits of access to quality, curriculum relevant and appropriate online information.

Term of Reference 3**The factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians**

No comments are offered on this Term of Reference.

Term of Reference 4:**The role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians**

No comments are offered on this Term of Reference.

Term of Reference 5:**The impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians**

Without doubt digital technologies, particularly quality information accessible through new technologies, are critical to enable students to develop skills that are required in the workplace and for life.

School libraries need to be able to provide quality online services. In turn, this requires teacher librarians with appropriate skills and knowledge to support students and teachers to develop skills to use the online environment.

No school can afford to do that separately. ERA provides a national collaborative platform which drives cost efficiencies and supports the developments of skills and services for students and teachers in schools and in the community.

Whole-of-sector subscriptions for e-resources

For a very small annual expenditure (amounting to a few dollars per student) Australia could achieve a national program of informed and skilled students in the online environment, rather than the current piecemeal approach where only 650 schools (out of 9,500) have access to quality online resources.

Never has there been a better time to provide quality online curriculum and learning resources to every Australian student. The basic requirements for achieving this are:

- computers to access the online environment;
- an efficient network to easily access information;
- quality online resources purchased for the nation's children; and
- training provided by teacher librarians to give equal, fair access to support the development of information literacy by students and teachers.

To date ERA has worked with more than 650 school libraries to support subscriptions, on a collaborative basis, to online products such as:

- World Book Web Complete
- Literature Resource Center
- Good Reading Magazine
- Science Resource Center
- MacquarieNet
- Global Issues in Context
- Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center

ERA has worked with the vendors of such products to obtain pricing for individual schools and, in some cases, for the entire Australian school sector. Where offered, whole-of-sector annual prices for particular products have (with the exception of one expensive product) ranged between \$49,500 and \$1.03M. An annual outlay of around \$4.8M would provide 13 quality e-resource products to every Australian student.

This would provide equitable access to every school student in Australia, and would cost considerably less than if each school took out an individual subscription. The ERA office in the National Library has estimated that, for typical products, use of the whole-of-sector prices are likely to save approximately 50% of the cost of an individual subscription for every Australian school.

AskNow 'chat' virtual reference service

AskNow (<http://www.asknow.gov.au/about-us.html>) is an Australasian collaborative virtual reference service designed to enable librarians and users to interact in real time via an online chat. The service was established in 2004 and is staffed by librarians from National, State/Territory libraries throughout Australia and New Zealand. The service runs from 10am – 7pm AEST, with three librarians, potentially located in different parts of the country, available online to assist users during each hour of operation.

Although AskNow is not specifically targeted at students, it has proven to be a popular teaching and learning resource, with all levels of students, from primary to tertiary, regularly using the service. School students and young people make up the biggest client group for the AskNow service. Students come seeking assistance from librarians to locate information for their school assignments and projects. A typical interaction lasts approximately 15-20 minutes, with the librarian providing the student with links to quality websites, guidance on search strategies to find additional information, and references to books or other resources relevant to the topic. It is not uncommon for teacher librarians and teachers to facilitate access to the service, with groups of students chatting with librarians during class time to receive information and advice on their research topic.

AskNow has been a useful forum through which students can receive a positive library experience and gain some valuable research advice from professional librarians. It has also been a useful resource for teacher librarians in small or remote communities, without access to extensive library resources, to be able to refer their students, and their particular needs are better supported by teacher librarians and public librarians. Recognising the popularity and educational potential of the service, National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) approached the Department of Education, Science and Technology, as it was at the time, about the possibility of establishing a chat service tailored for students in 2006/7. The aim was to design a service with direct involvement by the education sector specifically targeted at students. At the time, there were a number of barriers to adopting this approach and the proposal was not adopted. Cost was certainly a factor, as was the lack of a national curriculum, as it was felt that, as an educational service, it would need to be aligned with current educational thinking about teaching and learning. New Zealand has successfully established a similar service, entitled Any Questions (http://www.anyquestions.co.nz/?page_id=14), which is run collaboratively between the education and library sectors in that country.

In recent years, AskNow has experienced a significant overall decline in usage, although use by school-age children remains steady. User behaviours appear to be changing as more options for finding information become available. Although chat reference has declined, the National Library and other NSLA member libraries have seen a dramatic increase in the number of reference enquiries that have been submitted through email forms on the website over the last couple of years. With an exponential increase in the amount of information available on the Internet, many people seek the advice of librarians to navigate the wealth of content they find. Accordingly a decision has been taken to cease offering the AskNow service in December 2010, changing the focus of the collaborative online reference services provided by NSLA libraries.

School age children and their teachers are the user group which will be most affected by the closure. Teacher librarians play a crucial role in educating young people to effectively locate, assess and use appropriate information. The consistent use of AskNow by students since the service was introduced demonstrates the important role that library services can play in their education. It is recommended that the Inquiry give consideration to the potential role for a national collaborative service similar to New Zealand's Any Questions which is specifically designed to meet the needs of school students and teachers.

References

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