



CANBERRA ACT 2600 AUSTRALIA
TELEPHONE (06) 262 1111
TELEGRAPHIC CODE ADDRESS
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TELEPHONE TYPEWRITER NUMBER
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NATIONAL LIBRARY FACSIMILE
(02) 6257 1703

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Mr Rod West
Chair, Higher Education Financing and
Policy Review Committee
Location 728
GPO 9880, Canberra City
ACT 2601

Dear Rod,

National Library of Australia response to *Learning for Life*, the Discussion Paper of the Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy

The National Library is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the Discussion Paper *Learning for Life* before the Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy presents its final report in early 1998.

In its submission to the Review, the Library made the following key points:

- that there is a strong need for an efficient national library and information services infrastructure which will support the activities of the Australian higher education sector;
- that there is no conflict between the development of such an infrastructure and the emergence of the increasingly competitive and global education market place; indeed, the enhancement of the national infrastructure can support national competitive advantage;
- that there should be a new Program to support the collaborative development of this infrastructure in Australia, funded through "top-slicing" existing funding for the higher education sector; and
- that there should be a new steering committee, with appropriate stakeholder representation, to provide advice to the Commonwealth on the policies, priorities and funding for this Program.

In reiterating these views, the Library makes the following comments on the Discussion Paper.

The Discussion Paper notes that technological change will, amongst other impacts, create opportunities for the development of new types of library and information services; that it will stimulate an increase in the level of competition between Australian higher education institutions; and that it will facilitate the entry of new external education and information suppliers. As the Library observed in its submission, one of the keys to exploiting these opportunities will be the development of an efficient national networked-based library infrastructure that covers both the higher education and other sectors.

The Library believes that the Discussion Paper appears to underestimate the importance of libraries as key structures for both applying and delivering the benefits of the new technologies.

The Australian library community, with strong support from the National Library, has built the foundations for an effective national library system. However the emerging distributed networked environment is bringing significant changes which have created a new agenda for library co-operation. There is an opportunity for the Commonwealth to support the collaborative efforts of the Australian library sector to develop a new infrastructure which will enhance the services of higher education libraries and deliver benefits to the higher education sector as a whole.

The Library, while appreciating the value of competition and individual autonomy within the higher education sector, reiterates its view that achievement of the vision outlined in the Discussion Paper will depend in part on government involvement in shaping and building the new information and library infrastructure. In its submission, the Library argued that the building of this infrastructure should be seen as "precompetitive" and that the infrastructure will be a key element in positioning Australia to compete more effectively in a global market; as well as delivering efficiencies for all institutions within the higher education sector.

It is not clear from the Discussion Paper that the Review recognises the importance of this infrastructure as key element for achieving national competitive advantage. The need for government involvement, and funding options such as the Library's proposal for top-slicing, are not canvassed in the Discussion Paper.

The Library believes that any further delay by the Commonwealth to invest in the development of this infrastructure will disadvantage Australian universities in maintaining their existing services, and in successfully competing in the developing global education market.

In its submission, the Library argued that there was a connection between the library infrastructure and the overall national priorities for research. The Discussion Paper does not acknowledge that Australia needs a national research agenda, or that there is a need for a more coherent process for setting and funding national research priorities. The library and information infrastructure could be seen as a key component of such a process, providing support for improved access to information resources in priority disciplines.

In its submission to this Review, the Library questioned the existing ARC funding processes and their effectiveness in building a coherent national information infrastructure to support the achievement of research activities. The Library reaffirms the recommendation made in its submission for the establishment of a National Information Steering Committee to provide guidance on national policy, and advice on the funding of information, communications and library infrastructure to support higher education teaching and research.

The Library supports the broad directions outlined in *Learning for Life*, and acknowledges that the Discussion Paper by its nature did not canvass specific strategies and detailed recommendations. However, the Library believes that the key points made in its original submission, and repeated above, remain to be addressed by the Review.

Yours sincerely

Warren Horton
Director General
22 December 1997

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