

# Who's the Cinderella?

A recent Senate report on adult and community education leaves libraries out in the cold.

by Peter Judge

**A**T THE END of 1991 the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training issued a report with the imaginative title of *Come in, Cinderella—the Emergence of Adult and Community Education*. Senator the Hon. Terry Aulich, ALP, Tas, a former teacher, chaired the Committee, which had two other former teachers and a university lecturer among its twelve members. The *Cinderella* in the title refers to adult and community education, which the report concludes ought 'to emerge from its Cinderella status and to assume its rightful place alongside the formal education sectors'. Two out of the 305 submissions to the inquiry came from the library sector—from the Warringah Shire Library Service (225) and the SA Branch of ALIA (263).

The inquiry's terms of reference are shown in box A. Such a wide-ranging mandate might lead librarians in many areas of education to expect that the Committee's findings would have great relevance to their activities. In the event, this is not the case and libraries have received little more than a passing mention in the report or in the recommendations.

The Committee's study brought out a number of interesting points, shown in the second box. Some of them confirm what we may have long suspected.

We have to look hard in the report to find anything specifically about libraries. For example, the Committee noted that (p 70): 'Apart from the many organisations who (sic) would deliberately classify themselves as providers of adult and community education there are many others who exercise an important general educative function as part of their main purpose. These include museums, art galleries, zoological and botanical gardens, libraries, the myriad of special interest clubs and societies, churches, gymnasias, support groups and so on.'

The Committee went on to say, 'That so many people are regularly involved with such organisations; that a major museum or art exhibition can attract more people than a season of rugby league; that Australians buy more books per head than almost any other country—these are all indicators of a community which values learning and intellectual

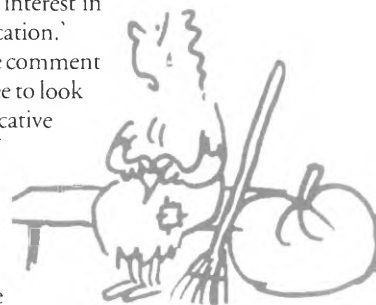
activity. They are hallmarks of a community with a proven and substantial interest in broad-spectrum, lifelong education.'

However, this appreciative comment did not prompt the Committee to look more closely at the 'general educative function' of different kinds of libraries. Nor did it look at what needs to be done for (and to) libraries so that they may contribute to this function more effectively. We find only support (p 40) for 'the use of publicly-funded buildings (schools and libraries as well as TAFE) without charge by bona fide, non-profit providers of adult education at times when these buildings would be otherwise unused'.

The Committee made some thirty recommendations. They begin with some big broad-brush proposals for

- the immediate establishment of a high level Working Party to develop a national policy on adult and community education, drawing upon the findings of this Report;
- the immediate establishment by the Commonwealth of a formal Advisory Committee on Adult and Community Education to assist the Minister in policy formulation and other matters related to the sector;
- an office within the Department (of Employment, Education and Training) to be responsible for the implementation of Commonwealth policy in adult and community education, and to ensure that adult and community education has permanent presence within the Commonwealth bureaucracy;
- funding guidelines to provide for both vocational and non-vocational criteria in determining grant allocations for adult and community education.

The recommendations focus on greater detail as they continue. Thus, R29 proposes a review of fees for adult basic education courses in TAFE and R30 calls for a grant-aid



## The terms of reference

- 1 Examine and describe existing policies and practices in adult and community education, with particular reference to the roles of Commonwealth and State government agencies; adult and continuing education centres in the higher education sector; TAFE ; voluntary and community programs; industry based training agencies; and professional bodies and trade unions.
- 2 Consider the impact of current demographic, economic and social change on patterns of adult and community education, on education providers and on education funding.
- 3 Identify barriers to participation in adult and community education and recommend means by which they might be overcome.
- 4 Examine the educational, employment and personal outcomes of participation in adult and community education.
- 5 Consider the training and supply of adult and community educators.
- 6 Recommend policies, strategies and processes to provide a coherent approach to the provision of adult and community education and to enhance its role and contribution.

## Key results

- Australia is the only OECD country without a national policy on adult education;
- the spread of adult and community education is astonishing: 6 in 10 Australians have taken an adult education course; there are over 700 adult and community education organisations operating in Victoria; 1.7 million people pass through neighbourhood houses across Australia each year;
- the formal education system cannot cope with the increasing demands for education and training, and the numbers in the fourth sector of adult and community education are increasing dramatically;
- prisoners and low literacy levels are closely linked. Of the 14,000 or so inmates of Australian prisons, a majority are functionally illiterate;
- adult and community education is a key factor in people finding pathways into employment or further education, and in reducing dependency;
- skills formation is a major, rapidly growing contribution of adult and community education to national economic goals;
- in the workforce there are 170,000 people with little or no English, most of whom receive no English language training. Another 190,000 elsewhere in the community are in a similar situation. They are turning to the community education sector as government migrant education programs get cut back.
- Governments should clearly try to make efficient use of the education and training capacity of the existing network of community-based providers.

► scheme to meet the costs of prisoners doing further education and training while in prison. Along the way, two of the recommendations include a mention of libraries:

(R21) that State and Territory governments establish policies which provide for:

- (a) the free use of school and TAFE buildings by bona fide non-profit community adult education organisations; and
- (b) reasonable access by such groups to associated facilities such as libraries, computer rooms, etc.

and

(R27) that:

- (a) universities give favourable consideration to requests from third age learning groups for access to lectures, library facilities and so on at a level consistent with equity and resource considerations; and
- (b) local governments and regional offices of human services agencies assist third age learning groups through the provision of basic administrative support for their operations.

Much of the inquiry is centred on community education, rather than adult education more broadly. With this emphasis we might expect *Cinderella* to single out public libraries for special mention, but this did not happen.

Should librarians be concerned at the outcome of this inquiry, if only at the neglect of their actual or potential role in this area? At present the National Library, ACLIS and ALIA (the Board of Education and the TAFE Working Party) are examining the report and its possible implications, to see whether some response is needed.

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