

# Information for innovation in a knowledge nation...



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Like other developed countries Australia, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of the mind, will be focused on the knowledge economy where the nation's wealth will depend less on its production and conversion of raw materials, and more on the abilities and intellect of its people and the skills with which organisations harness and develop those abilities. However, as a briefing paper *Skills for knowledge management* for the United Kingdom Library and Information Commission, puts it:

*For organisations to compete effectively in the knowledge economy they need to change their values and establish a new focus on creating and using intellectual assets to acquire new combinations of skills. In particular they need to learn skills that allow them to find, manage, share and use information and knowledge ... they need information literacy*

The April 2001 Chifley Research Centre report *The comparative performance of Australia as a knowledge nation* suggests that at the government and corporate levels this message is still not well understood:

*... Australia has fallen behind most of the OECD in investment in knowledge while other nations are moving ahead with public investment in R&D and education ... In doing so it is placing its future position in a knowledge based world seriously at risk.*

Or as one prime minister has observed:

*The future belongs to countries whose people make the most productive use of information, knowledge and technology.*

Which prime minister, you may well ask, was perceptive enough to say that? It was Goh Chok Tong, prime minister of Singapore, quoted in a recent booklet about the booming public library development in that country.

At a national political and policy level Australia has been relatively slow off the mark, although both the federal government and the opposition have now come out of the blocks. In January we saw the government's *Building Australia's ability — an innovation action plan for the future*, and in July the opposition's *An agenda for the knowledge nation*. Commentators have inevitably been sceptical about the substance and detail — or lack of it — of both approaches but both are essentially positive responses to long stated need. To what extent, then, do they convey any sense of the 'recognition of (national) need for information', that first and most critical aspect of the definition of information literacy?

Both should have done much better. The only significant outcome from the government's statement is the provision of \$246 million over five years 'to upgrade the basic infrastructure of universities' to support research and research training. University libraries, individually and collectively, will likely receive a proportion of this, but will be in competition with many other parts of university infrastructure in urgent need of upgrading.

The opposition's statement, at recommendation 17, proposes a National Information Policy because 'equitable access to information is a prerequisite for an inclusive knowledge nation. Access to information in Australia is currently very poor...' That last observation overstates the case. Some

Australians — most significantly politicians, senior bureaucrats and academics — have, in the main, good access to information if they recognise their need for it. Citizen Jane Blow, depending on where she lives, her level of education and her wealth, has significantly less.

The statement could have more usefully asserted that 'Recognition of the need to invest in access to, and effective utilisation, of information for all Australians is a prerequisite for a knowledge nation'.

This is because a fundamental indicator of whether a country is capable of being an inclusive, innovative and knowledge nation should be its per capita and GDP percentage investment in its library and information services. Australian public libraries — used by sixty per cent of Australians — need much better investment in buildings, analog and digital resources, technology and professional staffing — to achieve their potential to significantly reduce the information and digital divide. Australian business and industry has long been regarded as a poor overall investor in R&D — persuading it to invest in information enabled R&D is no easy task. Too frequently the reaction of a corporation, organisation and government department to fiscally driven restructuring is the short-sighted one of lopping that very part of it which can provide the proactively acquired and mediated information critical to its future. And too many Australian school children lack access to a wide range of books and digital resources, and qualified teacher librarians. The 2001 report *Young Australians reading notes*, for example, that because of the emphasis in secondary school libraries on electronic resources, this 'further distances the library from being seen as a place to find books to enjoy'.

Someone asked me last year whether, if everyone became information literate, weren't we at risk of doing ourselves out of our jobs? Not so — if everyone recognises their need for information, the most cost-effective way for some will increasingly be to engage a library and information services professional to identify, access, evaluate and synthesise the needed information. A nation of innovation and knowledge which does not invest heavily in its library and information services professionals is implausible. However the critical issue is having Australian governments, business and industry recognise their need for mediated, timely and relevant information, and that there is a profession which can meet that need, because it is doing so already. The clever country, the smart state, the innovation nation and the knowledge nation all provide the rhetorical window of opportunity for the whole of our profession.

Theodore Hesburgh, the highly-successful president of the US Notre Dame University once observed:

*The very essence of leadership is you have to have a vision. It's got to be a vision you articulate profoundly on every occasion. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet.*

We have a vision of an information-enabled Australia — it is time to blow that trumpet with absolute certainty. ■

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