

# Information literacy and our role in a thriving information society



Prue Mercer

One of the myths of today is that finding and evaluating information ought to be easy.

A recent study from the Pew Internet and American Life project (<http://www.pewinternet.org>) indicates that millions of Americans search the internet for information to help with life decisions such as education, changing careers, making a major purchase or investment.

However along with the ongoing success of internet search engines the need for specialised advice, training and information literacy is still recognised in this digital world, perhaps even more so given the volume and type of information now available.

Information technology skills are base skills for developing information literacy and knowing how to use and manage information and knowledge, not a replacement or substitute.

The development of the information or knowledge economy has brought with it recognition of the value of a learning society. This emphasises the importance of active and involved citizens who can reflect and develop their own approach to information, and not just be passive receivers of information.

It is within that context that libraries promote information literacy and learning for life.

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has just announced that from September the Round Table on User Instruction is to become the Information Literacy Section. This is clear evidence of international acceptance of the term and its concepts.

In her June 'Frontline', ALIA president Joyce Kirk acknowledged the key role the immediate-past-president of ALIA, Dr Alan Bundy, took in focusing on information literacy. Information literacy has come of age in our profession as the key to lifelong learning in society and for cultural, social and economic inclusion.

Information literacy developments in Australia have always been at the forefront internationally due in large part to Dr Bundy and the University of South Australia — from 1992 when the first conference was held in Adelaide to the publication of the CAUL *Information Literacy Standards* in 2001.

In 1997 a Special Interest Group of ALIA was established and this became the ALIA Information Literacy Forum as part of the association's restructure in 2001.

The ALIA Information Literacy Forum held a round table last year to gauge the level of interest in forming a national coalition similar to the national forum in the United States. The

American coalition established in 1989 has a membership of more than sixty-five national organisations that represent business, government and education. The National Forum has worked successfully to advocate for information literacy in their programs.

The Round Table led to a national coalition project between ALIA, the National Library of Australia and the National Office of the Information Economy. Together we formed a steering committee to manage a research project to assess the feasibility of an Australian information literacy coalition.

The questions we wanted to explore were to do with viability, identifying relevant and interested organisations, particularly beyond the library and education sectors, and possible organisation structures.

We employed the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) to do this research and their report is about to be released. The research, which includes a survey of national and international projects, is of value in itself. More than ninety organisations were surveyed, and twenty interviewed in detail.

Our action plan to advance the coalition was accepted by the ALIA Board of Directors at its last meeting and we will soon be releasing the report widely. The next stage of the process involves working with a broad-based group (hopefully including organisations such as the Internet Society and Adult Learning Australia) to identify a network and activities to develop a strategy across the whole of society. The strategy will advocate for information literacy as a critical skill for cultural, social and economic inclusion and lifelong learning.

As the *ALIA Policy Statement on Information Literacy for all Australians* states:

'A thriving national and global culture, economy and democracy will be best advanced by people able to recognise their need for information, and identify, locate, access, evaluate and apply the needed information.'

Social researcher Hugh Mackay, in his speech at ALIA2002 in May this year, commented that shrinking households (as evident in the latest national census) may drive a revival of community and that libraries could be a vital part of that revival. Information literacy is a key program for all libraries to provide and a community revival would support and reinforce the value of an information literacy coalition across society.

What better opportunity for us to demonstrate our role and relevance to the information economy and the learning society? ■

*...The strategy will advocate for information literacy as a critical skill for cultural, social and economic inclusion and lifelong learning...*