

ALIA working for special libraries 2016-2021

Report March 2021

Background

In 2016, at the ALIA National Conference in Adelaide, we invited 28 leaders from special libraries in government, health, law, research and other fields to come together and discuss the issues affecting the sector, with the aim of developing the basis for a collaborative national action plan.

The event was chaired and facilitated by former ALIA President Julie Rae, with presentations by Ann Ritchie, Convenor of ALIA Health Libraries Australia, Angela Vilkins, Executive Manager of GRAIL, and Leanne Griffiths, Senior Manager Information Outreach, CSIRO Library Services (pictured below).

From this summit came three strategic priorities which have guided the work of ALIA's Special Libraries Working Group over the last five years. These were advocacy, mutual support, research and best practice. This document sets out how these three priorities have translated into new resources, networking events and learning experiences for our Members.



While the ALIA Special Libraries Working Group and Australian Government Library and Information Network (AGLIN) have worked together on these strategic priorities, other ALIA Groups have been highly active in their own areas: ALIA Health Libraries Australia, ALIA Australasian Libraries in the Emergency Sector (ALIES), ALIA Prison Libraries and the ALIA state-based special libraries Groups – ALIA Law Librarians Queensland, ALIA SA Specials, ALIA Special Libraries VIC.

Priority 1 Advocacy

This poster and the accompanying A4 handout explaining '[How special libraries power high performance organisations](#)' are as relevant today as they were when we first produced them in 2017.

10 ways libraries power high performance organisations



- ### AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL LIBRARIES

There are as many as 2,000 special libraries in Australia serving clients in government, health, law, business, banking, consulting, research, science and technology, the arts, media and other industries. The word library doesn't always appear in the title; instead some are called information services or research units, terms which also describe their main purpose and function.
- ### FACTS NOT FICTION

In a post-truth, fake news environment, the need for information professionals in the workplace is even greater than before. Information professionals are not only trained in research and critical thinking, they help others develop these skills. Anyone can Google; not everyone knows how to identify the most relevant, timely and credible sources.
- ### MAKING BIG DATA USABLE

The role of the information professional has always been to manage and curate information, whether that's by cataloguing a collection to make it discoverable or by helping to turn a mass of statistics into a rich mine of information. These underlying skills are highly applicable in the context of big data.
- ### TAILORED RESOURCES

Special libraries create collections tailored to the needs of their clients. Increasingly, these are digital collections, including ebooks, journals and databases. Information professionals keep up to date with the very latest products, print and digital, and are skilled at negotiating the best subscriptions for their employer.
- ### ANY TIME ANYWHERE

Special libraries can support a global workforce to work any time, anywhere by delivering information straight to people's smartphones, tablets and laptops.
- ### WORLD VIEW

Individual librarians participate in formal and informal networks with their peers worldwide. They stay at the cutting edge of information theory and practice, and are the first to hear about new content and software from suppliers in Australia and overseas. The benefits to their organisations are increased expertise, resource-sharing and efficiencies.
- ### THE LATEST NEWS

Information professionals understand the special needs of their clients. They monitor the media, social media, print and online publications and other daily sources to provide alerts when highly relevant new information emerges. The information is targeted to organisational needs and objectives.
- ### LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

Information professionals are critical for learning organisations. They support the professional development needs of other staff by providing appropriate resources within the collection that help them remain relevant in today's knowledge economy.
- ### INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The roles of IT professionals and information professionals are intertwined. IT staff manage the pipeline, information professionals manage the content that flows through it. Today's information professional has a good knowledge of IT and is a confident user of new technologies, which is a real asset to the team.
- ### PRESERVING THE PAST

While much of the action in special libraries is digital, organisations will still have print collections and paper records which need to be maintained or replaced with digital facsimiles. Sometimes there are unique materials of historic significance. Librarians are the professionals who know how to sustain and future-proof this content for the next generation.



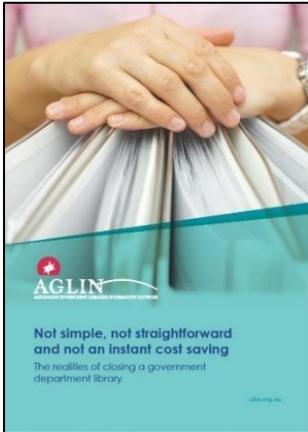
Australian Library and Information Association

www.alia.org.au





In 2018, we updated our government library prospectus [Australian Government libraries: policy decisions based on fact](#). This document states the case for government library and information services and calls for all departments in state, territory and federal governments to have equal access to quality information and resources managed by qualified professionals.



[Not simple, not straightforward and not an instant cost saving: The realities of closing a government department library](#) is a 6-page guide to some of the issues managers need to consider before making any firm decisions about the future of their library service.

The [ALIA Guidelines for Australian Special Libraries](#) first adopted in 1993 were fully revised in 2019 and we added the [ALIA Guidelines for undertaking a library review](#) and [ALIA Guidelines for special libraries experiencing service reviews](#). The [Principles of Access to Public Sector Information](#) were also revised and updated.

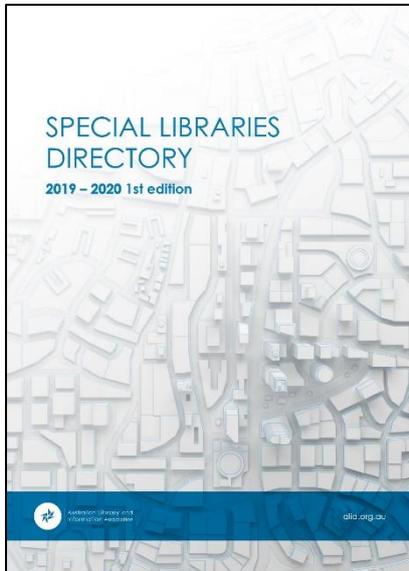
Also in 2019, we paid for advertising and two advertorials in [The Mandarin](#), the news source for senior government officials. The first was 'The value in government libraries', featuring Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Secretary Frances Adamson about the important work her library does and how it adds value to the Department. The second was 'Celebrating 45 years of the Australian Institute of Criminology Library', with the Institute's Director explaining why the J V Barry Library is so critical for the organisation.



The content for these advertorials was inspired by an [ALIA INCITE special supplement](#) on special libraries, again published in 2019.

Priority 2 Mutual support

Since 2016, the Australian Government Library and Information Network (AGLIN) and Australasian Libraries in Emergency and Security (ALIES) have become ALIA Groups and are part of the ALIA special libraries community.



Now in its 3rd edition, we publish a [Special Libraries Directory](#), updated twice a year, which enables special library teams to connect with others working in a similar environment, using the same library management system or with a shared subject interest.

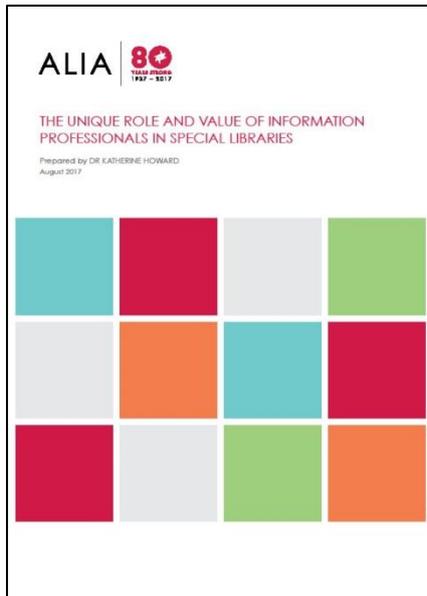
Pre-COVID, think tanks sessions were held at ALIA House and by video conference in February, April and August 2019. These sessions, involving librarians from around Australia, confirmed the strategic priorities for the sector, with a focus on advocacy, skills development and activating professional networks for best practice and information sharing.

Face-to-face events included a tour of the CSIRO library at Black Mountain, in Canberra, and an advocacy workshop with the CSIRO team, led by Cynthia Love. There was also a tour of Arup Library in Sydney; a roundtable with special library colleagues in Hobart, a meeting for information exchange with Danish special library professionals in Melbourne, and a government library advocacy event at the State Library of South Australia in Adelaide.

During COVID, Zoom enabled us to bring special library colleagues together online, in May with an AGLIN online panel discussion 'Government libraries in unprecedented times' and in December with speakers on [Special libraries and COVID-19 – lessons learned and future directions](#).

Priority 3 Research and best practice

Since 2016, the ALIA Learning team has worked with special library Members to develop and refine [ALIA PD Scheme specialisations](#), including Health, Government and Data, and special libraries have been consulted in the development of the [Professional Pathways](#) strategy.



[The unique role and value of information professionals in special libraries](#) was a 2017 investigation into competitors to the traditional and potential roles of special librarians. The report also identified the unique skills that set special librarians apart from other professionals.

At the end of 2020, we held our first roundtable for special library leaders with the Scholarly Journal Committee of the Australian Publishers Association. This identified themes around the mutual value for publishers and libraries in the current ecosystem; issues and opportunities around data; funding challenges and open access. A further event is being planned for 2021.

Next steps

In addition to the activities and achievements described in this report, there have been important projects and initiatives undertaken by ALIA Health Libraries Australia, ALIES, ALIA Prison Libraries, ALIA Law Librarians Queensland, ALIA SA Specials and ALIA Special Libraries VIC. All of this has only been possible through the support and involvement of ALIA Members employed in special libraries.

We appreciate that people in the sector are often working on their own or in very small teams and can be especially time poor – but if you are interested in being involved, please contact advocacy@alia.org.au. Your knowledge, experience and insight will be very welcome.

And take a look at the ALIA Groups page for opportunities to connect with people in your field <https://www.alia.org.au/our-communities/alia-groups>.