



Submission: Current and emerging threats to TGD human rights

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) thanks the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) for the opportunity to make this submission addressing current and emerging threats to transgender and gender diverse human rights in Australia.

ALIA is the peak organization for the Australian library and information services (LIS) sector, and includes the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance (ALIA APLA), which is the national body for public libraries in Australia, representing all the state and territory public library associations.

Australia's public libraries provide access to information in safe and inclusive spaces across 1700 public access points. Public libraries are vibrant community hubs - even in the covid-impacted 2021-2022 years 150 million physical and digital items were borrowed from public libraries in Australia, and 3.5 million participants enjoyed public programs, from children's storytime to author talks.

ALIA's submission is limited to the provision of information about the challenges that library services, predominantly public library services, have faced when hosting LGBTQIA+ events and when providing or displaying LGBTQIA+ content, with a focus on trans and gender diverse content. The submission does not speak to the impact of these actions on trans and gender diverse people or communities as this is not within our area of expertise.

Challenges to LGBTQIA+ programs

ALIA members raised concerns with ALIA in early 2023 that they were seeing an increase in what appeared to be anti-LGBTQIA+ actions aimed at public library programs and collections. These seemed to draw strongly from strategies in the USA from groups seeking the removal of LGBTQIA+ materials and programs from libraries, which have progressed to legal sanctions against content and programs in numerous states.¹

Similarly to the USA, protests in Australia have focused on drag storytimes. Public libraries in Australia have been hosting drag storytimes, often as part of LGBTQIA+ programming, for many years without issue. However, over the last 18 months certain events have been targeted with phone calls, emails, in-person complaints, social media posts and physical protests calling for the events not to go ahead. These have often been accompanied by threats, including credible threats of violence, harassment of library staff

¹ Kottke J (2024) *New wave of bills targeting libraries is 'a threat to our democracy'* American Library Association warns NBC News <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/new-wave-bills-targeting-libraries-threat-democracy-american-library-a-rcna138558>

during physical protests.² While some events have been able to proceed with local community support and counter-protests,³ other performances have had to be cancelled.⁴

Other protest actions recorded across the last 12 months aimed at trans and gender diverse communities have included protests to councils, council motions against particular books, library materials and drag storytimes, filming LGBTQIA+ content in libraries and broadcasting complaints, placing anti-trans bookmarks into library books on the shelves and verbal abuse directed at library staff.

Challenges to LGBTQIA+ content

Since March 2023 ALIA has been collecting and recording reports of book challenges. In the 12 months through to March 2024 ALIA has been notified of 105 individual challenges. The vast majority of the content challenged has been LGBTQIA+ content, including books that deal with trans and gender diverse issues or with trans, gender diverse or drag queen characters.

Gender Queer

In 2023 the Australian Classification Board called in the book *Gender Queer* for classification. *Gender Queer* is an autobiographical non-fiction graphic memoir, written by Maia Kobabe, that explores the author's path to identifying as nonbinary and asexual. The Australian Classification Board assessed that the book should be classified as 'unrestricted with the consumer advice '(M – Not recommended for readers under 15 years)'. This decision was appealed and considered by the Australian Classification Review Board, which also decided that the book should be classified as 'unrestricted with the consumer advice '(M – Not recommended for readers under 15 years)'.⁵

Gender Queer is one of the most challenged books in the USA⁶ and has been targeted due to its subject matter that explores gender diversity. In ALIA's submission and appearance before the Classification Review Board, ALIA raised concerns that removing or restricting *Gender Queer* (and other LGBTQIA+ titles) from library shelves would deny access to affirming materials for vulnerable members of our community who are non-binary, transgender, and/or asexual, many of whom are subject to prejudice and are at risk of self-harm and suicide.

Ongoing challenges

To date in 2024 we have seen no decrease in abnormally high level of challenges to LGBTQIA+ programs and collections in libraries. This is placing considerable strain on public libraries, ongoing psychosocial

² The Project (2023) *Another drag storytime cancelled amidst fears of violence*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paQ1CPkpM3U>

³ Drewitt-Smith A & McLaren N (2023) *Illawarra community rallies in support of rainbow storytime amid far-right protests* <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-25/thirroul-community-rallies-in-support-rainbow-lgbtqi-storytime/102521192>

⁴ Topsfield J (2023) *'Incredibly disappointed': Drag Queen storytime moved online after threats* The Age <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/incredibly-disappointed-drag-queen-story-time-moved-online-after-threats-20230515-p5d8cd.html>

⁵ The Australian Classification Review Board decision can be viewed here:

<https://www.alia.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/ALIA-Docs/classification-review-board-review-board-reasons-gender-queer.pdf>

⁶ Italie H (2023) *Maia Kobabe's 'Gender Queer' tops list of most criticized library books for third straight year* <https://apnews.com/article/maia-kabobe-gender-queer-challenged-library-book-d3e4de3fc0243e42f6ca7bc7fac65979>

and physical risks to library staff and communities, and significant resourcing challenges for ALIA and ALIA APLA.

When these actions started, ALIA and the library sector could see that these were part of the larger picture, and often being led by groups that were also causing issues in other areas. However, there was no clear place for libraries to report outside of the local level, no clear national-level information and no national support. ALIA still has not identified national level reporting opportunities, information or resources. ALIA would be very pleased to receive information about where we should be reporting these incidents to inform a national picture, or access any additional resources to help prepare and support libraries across the country to ensure that they are able to continue to be safe, supportive and inclusive spaces for the whole community.

