# International Council on English Braille

# Mid-Term Executive Meeting

# Dublin, Ireland

# Australia Country Report - April 2018

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## Introduction

Australia continues to flourish with the implementation of UEB in place nationally. Libraries and agencies produce exclusively in UEB and school examinations including standardised tests are transcribed in the code. In a fast-moving period where braille is increasingly available on the fly, this makes translation of electronic materials more straightforward allowing universities and schools to produce work for their own students in-house with straightforward text materials. Complex materials such as mathematics and music are for the most part undertaken by larger organisations such as the state education departments or Vision Australia, which is the largest service organisation for blind people in Australia. The Australian Braille Authority (ABA) continues to work hard to promote braille and best practice in braille production. Our focus has shifted in the last two years from developing publications and teaching resources in UEB to implementing this work through workshops and braille promotion. The ABA has groups of individual members called Regional Braille Forums: Local groups of braille enthusiasts that actively promote braille to individual consumers, teachers, parents and children by running fun braille activities and informative workshops several times a year.

In 2016 we reported that the Reserve Bank of Australia were shortly introducing bank notes displaying a tactile feature which would identify the various denominations. In 2016 the $5 note was introduced which has a tactile dot on each side of the note. I am excited to report that in 2017 the $10 followed which has two dots side by side, thus differentiating it from the $5. These new notes are gradually circulating, and it is a nice surprise when you find a new note in your change during financial transactions. Along with our cash test device which continues to be produced, this enables blind Australians to identify money much more easily.

Signage standards include braille specifications for new buildings, so it is much more common to find braille on lifts and other public facilities. Occasionally we find “braille fails” where the braille is upside-down or incorrectly produced, but access is improving all the time. The ABA had input into a revision of these standards, which is nearing completion.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has been introduced: Individualised funding for people with a disability to obtain services and technology to support them at home and in the community. The scheme is rolling out gradually across the country and we are learning about the benefits to individuals as they receive additional braille technology and related services.

## News from Organisations

### Vision Australia

**Children’s Services**

The Feelix Project, a lending library for children between 0 – 6 years, ran braille classes for Children’s Services teams in Victoria and Queensland. The Queensland sessions were conducted via Skype. A Braille Awareness kit has been put together for use with community groups and to be used on school visits. These went out to all Vision Australia offices in 2016. Story mornings continue to be run for children, and more books are produced in both print and braille for parents and children to read together.

**Adult Braille**

A post grade II Reading Support Group has been established in Sydney and meets once a month. It is now run independently and the participants are reading library titles together. A new Telelink group for clients who are current or potential braille for users is now operating those who would like to chat with others on all matters relating to braille. The participants wanted to continue meeting for support, information sharing and social contact. The group is facilitated and connected by a Volunteer who is an experienced and passionate braille user.

## Statewide Vision Resource Centre

The Statewide Vision Resource Centre is the Department of Education and Training (Victoria) facility that supports students who are blind or have low vision. It provides alternative format materials on request as well as running programs for teachers, students and families.

By the end of the 2017 school year, over 1,000 requests has been completed for braille and tactile materials. One student about to make his transition to the tertiary education world has SVRC brailling all year. One of his maths textbooks, translated into 52 volumes of braille!! And that’s only one of the books he needed. They hit the record for the most number of pages of braille to translate one page of a print maths book – it took 81 braille pages!

 2018 has seen an unusually high number of braille-reading students start school in Victoria. We had eight little braille-users start in Prep (or Foundation) in eight different schools. The second half of 2017 saw these youngsters, their families and teachers come in to SVRC for several sessions developed to assist their transition into school. Each school received technology specific to their child’s needs, including braille writers, embossers, Duxbury, PIAF machines and more. They also started the school year with a large collection of braille and tactile materials.

 SVRC also developed additional books and activities to supplement our Ozzie Dots braille reading program. Ozzie Dots is a ‘reading resource’ developed by SVRC to assist students to learn the UEB braille code. There is a set of more than 60 books which allows for practice of each of the abbreviations and contractions found in braille. For example, there is a set of books that allow for practice of “can” in braille, which appears as the letter “c”. There is another set for the special sign “the”. With this cohort of students new to braille, we developed some books and exercises to be help introduce and practice the braille alphabet. These will be used alongside the school resources.

 The Christmas school holidays are our peak production time with every student with a vision impairment making the transition to their next school level. We supply any braille materials requested and, in the case of the many students who use an electronic note-taker with a refreshable braille display, we might supply an electronic version to read on their device.

## Queensland Braille Writers Association (Braille House)

The Braille House library catalogue is now accessible from their website. They have also expanded their collection to include digital braille books.

Tutoring continues to attract students including two from Nauru. With the support of the Nauruan Government and Brisbane Catholic Education, two participants spent twelve weeks in Brisbane and while one learned braille, the other attended Braille House's Braille-for-Print-Users course.

Fundraising has been added to efforts to attract funds and raise awareness of the organisation. Braille House has also developed a Braille Awareness Program which consists of a package for use by community organisations to increase knowledge of the benefits of braille.

### Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children

In January 2018, RIDBC hosted 40 regional and remote-based families with children who are blind or have low vision, at a four-day Braille Camp in Sydney. These families represent some of the many families RIDBC supports through its Teleschool service that is celebrating its 10 year anniversary. RIDBC Teleschool provides education and therapy services to children with hearing or vision loss in regional remote Australia, using high quality videoconferencing technology in the family home or other local facilities.

“Children who access RIDBC Teleschool services often live in small remote, regional towns and because of that they don't always have access to professionals with specialist skills in hearing or vision impairment”, reportsTracey McCann, Head of Teleschool.

RIDBC Teleschool Braille Camps have been running for the past eight years. However, the Braille Camp held this year was the biggest one so far with over 150 people in attendance including children who are blind or with low vision, their parents and siblings.

The aim of the Braille Camp is for braille reading students to meet and play as well as practise their braille skills alongside other braille reading students. It also provides the opportunity for their parents and siblings who join them on the camp, to network with other families and learn from the experiences of others.

The Camp offered the opportunity to experience some exciting activities including trapeze, judo, a frog/wetlands activity, visits to Cockatoo Island and the Opera House, a stair climbing exercise, as well as braille/tactile activities.

## Dialogue and Dining in the Dark

Melbourne has welcomed two new organisations n the past year. Dialogue in the Dark offers a complete sensory experience for patrons to learn about what it is to be blind. They travel through an hour-long journey through a virtual city and how to navigate the environment without sight. Similarly, Dining in the Dark offers an experience for people to dine in the dark served by staff who are blind or vision impaired. We look forward to the continued development of these two international initiatives which have proved very successful in many other countries.

## ABA Regional Braille Forums

At present the ABA has two active forums holding regular meetings, promoting braille and running fun and exciting activities for children and adult braille users.

The Sydney Regional Braille Forum holds three meetings per the year where, along with a business agenda, guest speakers inform the meetings of developments in technology, braille research and braille outreach to the South Pacific and Asia. The Forum also hosts a very successful Awards Night celebrating our students’ achievements in a Braille Writing Competition. This annual competition is designed to promote braille literacy among our students and is continuing to grow in popularity every year. A children’s author attends the event and their book is transcribed into braille, and technology exhibitors donate prizes to the winners of the competition.

The major focus for the Queensland RBF has been Braille Club, a group held once a term for primary school-aged children to use braille in all sorts of practical ways. Topics range from braille music, mapping and cooking. Braille is a big part of these activities whether it be finding ingredients with braille labels or creating maps of a route using tactile aids such as baking trays with magnetic building blocks to be transferred to boards with stick-on foam pieces. More recently, though, the Braille Club has been led by Braille House, leaving the Forum to focus on other activities.

## ABA Communications

The ABA website continues to be a terrific resource for both braille transcribers, teachers and organisations looking for braille specifications or services on our directory. The addition of our resources page makes finding ABA publications and guidelines more straightforward. It is exciting to see how much is happening in the area of braille nationally via our events page which is updated regularly. Our Facebook page is growing in membership and continues to be updated with posts on interesting developments in braille internationally as well as the occasional amusing but unfortunate misplaced tactile signs or "braille fails" where signs contain mistakes or are upside-down.

The Ozbrl email list remains our most widely utilised vehicle both for advertising ABA activities and responding to queries from members. Discussion topics over the past couple of years have included difficult to solve braille queries, braille music formatting and consultation with members by our ICEB committee representatives. Ozbrl is also the forum where ABA posts updates and notices relevant to the UEB Proficiency test.

## Proficiency in Unified English Braille

The Trans-Tasman Proficiency Certificate is offered annually and is conducted in the first two weeks of October. It consists of three sections: a proofreading passage containing errors to find, translation from print to braille and translation from braille to print. Since the 2016 ICEB General Assembly we have had 12 successful candidates achieve proficiency in UEB.

## Guidelines for Foreign Language Material

The Rules of Unified English Braille Second Edition, 2013 (Rulebook) allows for a range of approaches when transcribing foreign language text, enabling the resulting braille to be convenient to read for a variety of types of text as well as for different groups of readers. At the 2017 National Meeting, the ABA discussed a paper presented by one of our executive to draw up guidelines on how Australia will translate foreign languages including Duxbury styles and codes. This document is assisted by existing guidelines produced by UKAAF and BANA, with permission. Draft guidelines will be presented at our upcoming National Meeting in May.

## Braille Music in Australia

The Australian Braille Authority has developed a register of braille music transcribers to aid communication between braille music specialists and provide contact information for individuals or organisations seeking braille music transcription or advice. This register is published on the ABA website at http://brailleaustralia.org/finding-braille/directory/.

This initiative was as a direct result of discussions held at our 2016 National Meeting and we hope to strengthen connections between those transcribing music in Australia.

Australia and New Zealand combined in January 2017 to run a Braille Music Retreat for adults. Based in Auckland, New Zealand over a long weekend, we sang from braille and recorded the results. Australia runs a very successful National Braille music Camp for children of upper primary-school and secondary school age to immerse themselves in braille music for a week. Previously, no forum of this nature was available to adults. The retreat was extremely successful with 18 participants, and we hope to run this every second year so that we can continue to promote braille music and strengthen relationships between the two countries.

## Gillian Gale, OAM

Gillian Gale was honoured in the 2018 Australia Day Awards in recognition of her lifelong work supporting braille literacy for vision impaired children. Among her many contributions, Gillian was co-author of the Ozzie Dots program, serves on the Steering Committee of the Feelix Library for early tactual literacy, edited the Round Table's Guidelines on Conveying Visual Information, and has worked as a vision specialist teacher in remote areas.

## Conclusion

These last two years have seen some new initiatives in braille in Australia including new or expanding camps for students and collaboration between Australia and New Zealand. Another bank note is now in circulation sporting tactile dots so it is easily identifiable by people who are blind, and hopefully by the next General Assembly we will be boasting one or perhaps two more notes. The ABA continues to foster high standards of braille production by continuing to administer the Trans-Tasman Certificate of Proficiency in Unified English Braille, and running workshops on topics related to braille formatting, production or coding. This year our topic will be on producing braille music with translation software. The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has changed the landscape for Australians with disabilities and for people who are blind and who use braille, This individualised government funding model means increased access to technology under these schemes. The schedule is in its infancy, however it is anticipated that individuals who have not been able to afford notetakers, braille displays or braille embossers will have the opportunity to access braille more quickly and easily.