# Country Report – Australia

# For distribution at the 7th General Assembly of the

# International Council on English Braille

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## Introduction

Over the last four years, Australia has continued actively promoting braille through our member organisations that have undertaken a wide variety of activities and programs, and through consumer and educator involvement in our Regional Braille Forums as subgroups of the Australian Braille Authority. Unified English Braille is now the recognised braille code in Australia which makes braille translation more streamlined for producers and braille readers. Australia is also very much involved in ongoing work conducted by ICEB through the Code Maintenance Committee. We can also report that all Australian Bank notes in circulation contain tactile and high contrast markings so that identifying money by touch is possible for people who are blind or have low vision. The National Disability Insurance Scheme has completed rolling out across the country enabling easier access to braille technology, in-home supports and community participation for people up to the age of 65. Older Australians have access to the My Aged Care Scheme which focuses on packages concerning predominantly independence and care in the home, however this access does not include technology access for braille. This is an area that still needs to be streamlined for equal access to braille technology across the age spectrum. Braille signage in Australia is increasing and includes art galleries and new public buildings. This has been as a result of much hard work by both the Australian Braille Authority and Blind Citizens Australia who offer input when the Access to Public Building Standards AS1428.1 is updated and it is encouraging to have this level of consultation around tactile and braille signage.

Over the past six months, Australian blindness agencies have stepped up to the challenge of finding new ways to deliver services to clients during the COVID19 pandemic. These will be included in the summaries below.

## News from Organisations

### Vision Australia

Vision Australia has offices in most states and is Australia's largest agency servicing clients who are blind or have low vision. Vision Australia continues to provide adults with Braille Training including Courses in Grade I and Grade II for blind and vision impaired clients and Grade I for sighted people. Those who are sighted wishing to learn Grade II are directed to the UEB Online Braille course. The Vision Australia braille correspondence course materials are available for library members to borrow through the online catalogue.

Vision Australia has a dedicated Transcription team of specialist transcribers experienced in STEM and Music production. We also offer a free personal support service to our clients funded by the Print Disability Grant from the Federal Government. We produce work for people of all ages, with a large amount for Tertiary students, and fee for service work for government and corporates.

The team has been working with the DAISY Music Braille Project to create a more automated way of producing braille music. We are also researching use of mainstream software such as Sibelius and Photoscore and integrating with GoodFeel for a more efficient braille music transcription process.

The transcription team was involved with James Day Photography to make tactile photos for a blind bride. We are researching other machines which are capable of producing tactile images … Watch this space.

Our STEM transcribers are currently looking at using epub3 files as a pathway into automated braille book production.

From February 2018 to February 2019, the VA Transcription team converted 64,000 print pages into braille. The total braille pages produced was 118,000 pages.

We also transcribed 2,600 pages of music braille and 3,200 tactual diagrams.

In our online catalogue, Vision Australia has 8496 downloadable braille titles, and 5348 music braille downloadable scores. We also have 368 hard copy titles. The Feelix Project, a lending library for children between 0 – 6 years now has 645 Feelix kits for loan to families. In addition, there are 771 braille picture books.

COVID19 support: Vision Australia has met the challenges faced by clients over the past six months by running telehealth services remotely by video or phone. This has involved getting clients up to speed with this technology as staff also work remotely. The transcription team has been busy sending out hard copy materials with staff taking turns with rostered days at the office and time working at home.

### Statewide Vision Resource Centre (Victoria)

SVRC continues to see an increase in requests for and the use of braille by our students.

We involve children and their families in braille, starting in pre-school. Families of blind children are invited to participate in our “Dot Power” program. Two groups of students, pre-school to Year 3, come twice a term to celebrate all things braille with songs, stories, cooking and activities, all with the purpose of reading as much braille as possible. Last year, we had even our pre-schoolers reading braille music and clapping the rhythms they read!

Students in Years 4 to 10 can participate in the Support Skills program, developing skills around the Expanded Core Curriculum including learning to use braille technologies, reading braille and braille maths or music, and producing their own tactile pictures in art.

For the past year, SVRC has partnered with Monash University on a project to research how 3D printing can enhance access to the curriculum. Our Transcription Manager, Deb Lewis, assisted Leona Holloway to present some of our findings at the January conference of the South Pacific Educators of Vision Impaired (SPEVI) in Adelaide.

With the roll out of funding for our Technology Library in 2019, students in Victoria are better equipped than ever with technology to provide access. Much of SVRC’s production is of electronic text (etext) material that students can read using their technology, including many devices with refreshable braille displays.

We are great promoters of the UEBOnline tutorials and often assist teachers to get started. In Term 1 each year, teachers and aides from schools attend a day learning about how best to include their students who are braille users, and in October, we invite schools who have a braille-reading student starting the following year to a day about their needs and the supports available. At our professional learning day about braille music, teachers are introduced to the code and ways of adapting the music curriculum for students who are blind.

SVRC’s most crucial task is to produce the alternative format materials requested for students throughout Victoria. We are seeing an increase in students taking Maths and Science subjects right through to their final year. Entire maths books are produced in braille by our skilled and creative transcribers. This involves careful re-design of graphics, essential to the students’ learning.

In 2019, the largest (Year 12) braille maths book we produced included 2,675 braille pages, 643 tactile diagrams and 59 volumes!! Altogether we produced 1,450 braille books (70,000+ pages!), 6,300 tactile diagrams, 300 pieces of braille music and 860 etext documents for our students. By March, we already had over 1,000 requests for alternative format materials!

Since March this year, SVRC has run the Support Skills Program for students via Zoom each Friday while students learn remotely during the COVID19 pandemic. This has enabled more students to gain access to this tailored service and helped them function better as online learning continues in some states of the country. We look forward to the time when students can once again meet in person to both study and socialise.

### Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC)

RIDBC has always been a leader in the field of braille production. We offer a range of alternative format materials, including braille, large print and eText. Our main clients are students within the independent school system, but we also do outside transcription jobs such as cards, menus and other documents. We also produce children's books in dual media format and are making inroads into the production of 3D-printed material.

The braille students on our service are a broad mix of ages and braille proficiencies. We are able to liaise closely with vision support staff to tailor material to the individual needs of the student, while staying firmly within best practice guidelines for formatting of braille materials.

Among our older and more proficient braille students, there is a growing trend towards electronic documents accessed using refreshable braille displays and notetakers. However, hard copy braille is still the format of choice for most of our students. All technical materials such as Mathematics and languages, plus work for lower primary school students, is produced in hard copy braille.

### UEB Online

UEB Online, a world-first free, online collection of braille training programs available anywhere, anytime has received a UN award**.** The award was presented in mid-February at The Zero Project Awards at the United Nations in Vienna. The ceremony was part of the annual Zero Project conference attended by 500 international guests. The Zero Project award comes two years after UEB Online was recognised by the World Braille Council for an innovative approach to teaching braille in low income countries and rural and remote communities. UEB Online now has more than 18,500 subscribers from 197 countries. Currently, the UEB Online website offers courses in UEB literacy, UEB mathematics and UEB advanced mathematics.

In the next few months UEB Extension Mathematics will be launched before the RIDBC design team focus on creating resources for STEM subjects of science, engineering and technology.

### Braille House

In 2017 Braille House, formerly known as Queensland Braille Writing Association, celebrated its 120th birthday. Braille House now has a General Manager, Sally Balwin, increasing our part-time staff. Sally's business, planning and change management expertise is enabling Braille House to respond to the NDIS and our changing environment.

The Braille House library catalogue is now accessible from our website. We have also expanded our collection to include digital braille books. Braille House also has a shop linked from our website.

Braille tutoring continues to attract students including two from Nauru.

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

### Awards for Australians working in Braille

ABA extends our congratulations to the following people who have been recognised for their achievements in braille over the past four years.

Christine Simpson was the 2018 recipient of the Tammy Axelsen Lifetime Achievement Award for service to the Round Table on Information Access for People with Print Disabilities Inc. Christine has been involved with the Australian Braille Authority for over 25 years, including six years as ABA Chair, and was editor of the Rules of Unified English Braille as part of her work with the ICEB Code Maintenance Committee.

Dr Gillian Gale was awarded a member (AM) in the general division of the Order of Australia in recognition of her extensive work supporting the education of children with a vision impairment throughout Australia. Among her many achievements, Gillian has worked as a vision specialist teacher, edited Round Table’s Guidelines on Conveying Visual Information, co-authored the Ozzie Dots program for early braille literacy, served on the steering committee of the Feelix Library, and is a life member of SPEVI. She has served as a teacher, mentor and inspiration to so many of the braille community.

Josie Howse, ABA executive member and coordinator of the Trans-Tasman Examination in Australia, was awarded Honorary Life Membership of SPEVI in recognition of her significant contribution to the field of vision impairment in Australia and internationally during the past 41 years. Josie has also served as an Australian delegate for ICEB General Assemblies since its inception, and contributed in a major way to Australia’s part in the development of UEB, and its implementation. In bestowing Honorary Life Membership, SPEVI recognises Josie’s passion for education and braille literacy for children who learn by touch.

### National Braille Music Camp

Australia's National Braille Music Camp was established in 1986. This week-long live-in education program provides young musicians with both formal and informal learning opportunities while improving participants' individual music related skills. In 2020 we did not run a music camp. Instead, two virtual concerts were help via Youtube where campers could choose to either record an item to be streamed, or submit an item recorded at a previous Camp. The Youtube streams ran as a radio broadcast and we had listeners and contributors from new campers as well as those who started attending in the 1980s.

### Australian Braille Authority

Over the past four years, ABA’s work has included workshops to promote new developments in braille. These have included: formatting with DBT (2017), Braille music production (2018), Transcribing documents in foreign languages (2019), and Producing documents with correct quotes and apostrophes (held online in 2020)

In 2021, ABA will celebrate its 40th anniversary. We plan to hold an event at the national conference of the Round Table on Information Access which will also be holding its 40th anniversary celebration.

### Regional Braille Forums

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

 They meet quarterly, and provide a space for braille users, transcribers, teachers and parents to exchange information about braille and its happenings. Both forums conduct activities involving our younger braille users, with an Annual Children's Braille Writing competition in New South Wales, and regular Braille Club days in Queensland each school term where participants are introduced to interesting and fun ways to use braille. In 2020, our forums have conducted several meetings via Zoom. We are delighted that the enthusiasm and dedication of members keeps these groups going through these challenging times.

### ABA Publications

The *Unified English Braille: Australian Training Manual* is in high demand. It can be downloaded from our ABA website and printed, embossed, read as a PDF file or as a braille file on an electronic braille notetaker. It is of immense assistance to anyone wishing to learn braille, or to revise their braille skills.

The DBT Producer's Manual (2011) was published after the release of DBT 11.1. Now that DBT 12.4 SR1 has been released, there are some aspects of the manual which are out-of-date. These summaries of changes in later versions are available for download from the ABA website.

*ABA Rules and Guidelines for Formatting Braille* represents literally years of work by a small and dedicated team of braille specialists. It is an essential reference for those wishing to sit the Trans-Tasman Certificate of Proficiency of Unified English Braille as it contains useful examples, rules and guidelines around formatting with DBT and Word.

The ***Australian Braille Authority Guidelines for Foreign Language Materials***are a series of documents providing advice on how to apply the UEB rules for foreign language material. This is ABA’s newest publication initiated by Kathy Riessen with feedback and input from transcribers producing materials in languages other than English. This document was assisted by existing guidelines produced by UKAAF and BANA, with permission.

These publications and many more resources are available for download from

<http://brailleaustralia.org/resources/>

### ABA Communication

The ABA website continues to be updated with a News feed as well as other new pages to provide resources and information to braille users and professionals in Australia. In 2017, a new page was created paying homage to the past figures who have made major contributions to braille in Australia. These include Tilly Aston, R.F. Tunley, Minnie Crabb, Dulcie Magnus, Mercy Dickinson, Joan Ledermann, John Shute and Ian Cooper. Our Resources page, added in 2017, makes finding publications easier, also our Directory of Braille Services is especially helpful when looking for braille repairers or braille producers. A Directory of Braille in Public Spaces was launched on 4 January 2020 as part of World Braille Day celebrations. Located at <http://brailleaustralia.org/finding-braille/public/> the directory serves to help touch readers find available resources and to acknowledge organisations that have provided braille or tactile accessibility.

The directory includes a list of restaurants with braille menus, cities with braille street signage, locations with braille and tactile maps, braille in playgrounds and parks, and products with braille labelling. A list of public art that is accessible by touch is also available from the Australia and New Zealand Accessible Graphics Group (ANZAGG) at <http://printdisability.org/about-us/accessible-graphics/publicart/> the Events page has been kept up-to-date with information about upcoming events relating to braille, such as training opportunities, conferences, technology displays, accessible art exhibitions and ABA meetings. See <http://brailleaustralia.org/events/>.

### Facebook page

As of February 2020, the ABA Facebook page had over 880 followers compared with 2017 when we had 560 followers. Our typical follower is female (77%) and Australian (61%).

The most popular posts in 2020 were:

* Braille fail (unisex accessible lift) – 2.7K
* Onkyo Braille competition announcement – 1.2K
* Thanks to Fox Creek Wines for sponsorship and provision of wine (with braille labels) at SPEVI Conference – 1.1K
* World Braille Day – 1.1K
* Blindfolded Twister available with tactile symbols 1.1K
* Congratulations to Tom Macmahon, awarded Tammy Axelson Lifetime Achievement Award 1K
* Braille fail (centred braille dots on a toilet sign) - 950

It should be noted that our love of braille fails has a more serious side, and has led to raised awareness of braille signage standards. Australian Building Codes require uncontracted braille at key access points, however there is currently no requirement for signs to be checked by a braille reader.

### Ozbrl

Ozbrl is the primary channel for communications from the Australian Braille Authority, as well as a place where anyone can ask or respond to questions about braille. In December 2019, Ozbrl was migrated to the groups.io platform due to the closure of some services on Yahoogroups where the mailing list previously resided, and the list is functioning well on the new server.

### Accreditation

Australia and New Zealand continue to jointly conduct the annual Trans-Tasman Proficiency Certificate examination in Unified English Braille in the first two weeks of October of each year. It is made up of three sections: a proofreading passage, translation from print to braille and translation from braille to print. The team of people working on the examination truly involves national collaboration: Tristan Clare (RIDBC Braille Transcriber) completed the mark-up and formatting for touch readers, Kathy Riessen and her team at the South Australian School for Vision Impairment collated packages for candidates, and Josie Howse and her team marked the examination papers. Since the Sixth ICEB General Assembly in 2016, 28 candidates have been accredited with the UEB Proficiency Certificate.

Sadly, the Australian Braille Authority Executive has reluctantly come to the decision that we will not be able to offer the Trans Tasman Proficiency Test in Australia in 2020. Preparation, distribution and marking of the examination is a big undertaking by teams of volunteers. Unfortunately, working from home, quarantine requirements and social distancing means that we would not be able to conduct the examination and marking in a timely manner this year. The next examination is planned to take place in October 2021. We will be uploading practice test materials with answers to the ABA website.

## Conclusion

Australia continues to champion promotion of braille through the work of our organisations who run programs for children and adults and produce thousands of braille pages each year. Electronic braille is becoming more widely requested meaning a decrease in turnaround time for braille access particularly for students. Our public spaces increasingly display braille signage allowing for greater access for locals or those visiting Australia to take advantage of. Our Regional Braille Forums and consumers ensure that braille is promoted and utilised in a variety of ways for our consumers, educators and students through face-to-face or increasingly through online mediums. The Australian Braille Authority continues to maintain high standards of braille both through the production of guidelines as well as accrediting more people with the Trans-Tasman Certificate of Proficiency in UEB, and braille music continues to be produced for a variety of settings including to facilitate the musical involvements of choristers, orchestral players, students and teachers. We are also fortunate to enjoy increased access to technology through the National Disability Insurance Scheme, thereby speeding up access to braille for clients through the provision of braille in electronic form through our organisations. It is truly exciting to see how much more flexibly braille is utilised in Australia in this ever-changing world of technology and access.

## Jordie Howell

## Chair: Australian Braille Authority