# Country Report – Australia

# For presentation to the 6th General Assembly of the

# International Council on English Braille

# Baltimore USA

# May 2016.

## Introduction

Since the 2012 ICEB General Assembly, braille readers in Australia have benefited from the application of new technologies to increase access to hardcopy and electronic braille; while changing community attitudes and higher expectations from braille users have led to the provision of more braille to enhance environmental access. The work of those responsible for the provision of braille has also been supported through the availability of new manuals and training materials that reflect our commitment to the UEB Code and high standard production. Below is a snapshot of what we are currently enjoying in Australia, with some exciting developments and news.

In February 2015 the Reserve Bank of Australia announced that the next generation of banknotes would include a tactile feature to assist vision impaired people to identify the various denominations. This feature is in addition to the existing bright colours, large and bold numerals and size differentials that have been features of Australian banknotes for many years. The Reserve Bank has also undertaken to continue funding the production of the "CashTest" banknote measure device.

We learned in March 2016 that the first of these notes – the $5 note – is to be released in September of this year. Each of the currency notes is to contain a tactual feature unique to that denomination. The tactual feature is said to be tamper-proof and able to withstand the rigors of circulation.

Blind people are now more likely to encounter braille and raised print signage when going about their daily lives. Information boards, room names or numbers, lift panels, bus stop routes and numbers, street signs and more are gradually being introduced. Most signs are very helpful, but lack of braille knowledge among installers means that reading some signs requires us to stand on our heads, while others may send us off in the wrong direction. Occasionally we need to interpret some secret and completely unknown code. There are still braille signs that require us to "press the red button for emergency help!" But we are getting there! The addition of raised print to these signs also makes them accessible to our vision impaired non-braille readers.

With the decreasing cost of refreshable braille, we now have better access to electronically stored print materials and increased access to mainstream literature. Increased computing power smart phone technology, and GPS devices, are often linked to braille displays and the resultant increase in information access is being welcomed with open arms and enthusiasm.

## Vision Australia

Vision Australia is Australia's largest, near-national service agency. Its Accessible Information Services division continues to demonstrate its commitment to the provision of braille items for library borrowers through ongoing development and growth of its literary and music collections. Its electronically stored collection consists of 7922 literary braille titles, 733 print braille titles and 2121 music braille titles. In early 2015, work commenced to identify the literary and popular classics within the remaining 38% hardcopy only items, with the intention of creating their eBraille masters.

Access to the collection has been made easier for borrowers who choose to use Vision Australia's Information Library Service’s i-access® online catalogue. Library members are now able to browse the catalogue, make a selection, and either have hardcopy posted to them, or where available, immediately download the braille eBook version. The number of eBraille loans is increasing and a steadily growing number of library borrowers are choosing braille eBooks alone.

## Statewide Vision Resource Centre (Victoria)

The Statewide Vision Resource Centre (SVRC) provides resources and support to vision impaired students who attend public sector schools across the state. SVRC conducts a number of programs focusing on the acquisition of braille skills by students with vision impairments, and those who support them. Along with a braille correspondence course, an annual onsite braille course, technology, alternative format production, and braille-focused special activity days. The staff of the SVRC support the teaching and learning of braille in many ways, including:

### Ozzie Dots:- was designed and produced in conjunction with education vision specialist Dr Gillian Gale. It is a self-contained resource that can be used to introduce contracted braille (UEB) to students in their early years of school. There are 255 books, featuring stories, poems, recipes and opportunities for concept development, with tactile illustrations on nearly every page. Ozzie Dots has been purchased by organisations in all Australian states and territories, New Zealand, USA, Canada, and Fiji. More information about Ozzie Dots is available from:

<http://svrc.vic.edu.au/educational-programs/ozzie-dots/>

### Dot Power:- is a program for children whose primary reading medium is braille. Based around the Expanded Core Curriculum, Dot Power is designed to encourage students to get as much braille under their fingers as is possible in one day! Eligible Victorian students from 4 years old (pre-school) to Year 3 are invited to participate in the SVRC Dot Power Program. Held each term at the SVRC, students participate in group activities designed to offer opportunities to read and write braille. One-on-one assistance is provided as required. Each day features a theme: a postman delivering letters, a mother bird feeding its babies, pizza-making, braille music, the Paralympics etc. More information about Dot Power is available from:

<http://svrc.vic.edu.au/educational-programs/dot-power/>

## UEB Online

The Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC) in New South Wales, launched the “UEB Online” braille training program for sighted learners in June 2014, following more than 12 months of development.

The program is based on the *Australian UEB Training Manual,* which was edited by Josie Howse, Kathy Riessen and Leona Holloway, and released by the Round Table on Information Access for People with Print Disabilities Inc. and the Australian Braille Authority.

Between June 2014 and January 2016, there has been a total of 39,815 registered users of UEB Online, with 972,700 page views and 166,409 individual sessions undertaken. Users of UEB Online, (as determined by the number of individual sessions), have come from the United States (58%), United Kingdom (18%), Australia (12.5%) and Canada (5.5%).

RIDBC is currently developing an accessible version, called “Accessible UEB Online”, that will be officially launched in Melbourne this month (May 2016). Development of the accessible version has been led by web site designer "PeppaCode", supported by a collaborative team of educators, researchers, consultants with vision impairment and engineers. The course content for both UEB Online and Accessible UEB Online is the same, thereby ensuring that the certificates of completion represent equal value, regardless of which version of the program is used. For more information, visit: <http://accessible.uebonline.org>

## 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. The 2016 Camp will once again be held in Mittagong, New South Wales in late June. Students from upper primary school through to senior secondary school who read braille music and Grade II braille are encouraged to attend.

## Australian Braille Authority

The Australian Braille Authority is charged with overseeing the development and maintenance of braille codes and specifications used in Australia. It serves as Australia’s braille accreditation body, and promotes braille as the primary literacy tool for people who are blind, deafblind, or have severe vision impairment.

The ABA Chair is a voting member of the Executive of our parent organisation, the Round Table on Information Access for People with a Print Disability Inc.

ABA members are Round Table Member organisations, with an interest in the production, teaching and use of braille. The work of staff and volunteers from member organisations in

providing high quality braille to readers throughout the country is invaluable to braille readers who benefit greatly from the braille code knowledge that these people acquire and demonstrate; the enthusiasm they show; and the care and pride they display through the diversity and complexity of transcription projects undertaken.

### Regional Braille Forums

Regional Braille Forums meet quarterly. They provide an informal mechanism by which braille users, transcribers, teachers and parents, can come together to learn and to exchange information about braille and its happenings. Each Forum also conducts activities involving our younger braille users, with an Annual Children's Braille Writing competition and also regular Braille Club days each school term where participants are introduced to interesting and fun ways to use braille.

### 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* remains a valued "how to" reference for DBT users. Its many explanations, screen dumps and step by step instructional guides are regularly called upon.

The most recent manual is the *ABA Rules and Guidelines for Formatting Braille*. It has been a long time in coming. It represents literally years of work by a small and dedicated team. In particular, we owe great thanks to Leona Holloway, for her persistence with and belief in the need for this title. Leona's work has been exemplary, but she could not have done it alone. Throughout the entire project, the working group members have been there to give input, encouragement, find examples, wordsmith the text, offer alternatives, proof and re-proof and much more. This manual in its various formats will shortly be downloadable from the ABA webpage.

These publications are available from [www.brailleaustralia.org/about-braille/](http://www.brailleaustralia.org/about-braille/)

### ABA Communication

Our newly established *Braille Australia Website* [www.brailleaustralia.org](http://www.brailleaustralia.org) receives a regular stream of queries, relating mainly to braille signage and standards, and also the availability of braille products, publications and services. We are seeing a steady increase in page views as the months pass. The most popular pages are those on Unified English Braille, the UEB Australian Training Manual and the Directory of braille services and products in Australia. The events page is constantly updated. Changes have also been made to the information for sign-makers, based on their feedback which we welcome.

The *ABA facebook page* [www.facebook.com/pages/Australian-Braille-Authority /149349021763394](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Australian-Braille-Authority%20%20/149349021763394) has more than 375 followers, Around 250 followers are from Australia, 25 from the US and 25 from New Zealand. The number from other countries is growing steadily. Our most popular posts reach several hundred, or even thousands, of facebook users. These posts tend to be stories about the importance of braille and new braille technologies.

The *Ozbrl listserv* ozbrl-subscribe@yahoogroups.com continues to be our primary means of communicating with members. Readers are encouraged to use it to share news and submit queries. Over the past year there has been an increase in queries about the availability of braille transcriptions (particularly music titles) and several "how to" questions. We encourage such enquiries.

### Braille Music

While Vision Australia transcribes much of the music that is required by braille reading musicians in Australia, there are many other transcribers brailling music; particularly in the education sector. This is done either manually, or with the aid of transcription software such as "Toccata" or "Goodfeel". Transcribers use the international manual of braille music transcription as well as the UK Transcription Layout Manual as reference texts, however, formatting practices differ between countries. To provide a one-stop reference for Australia, a group of transcribers and musicians came together and completed work on the *Australian Braille Music Addendum.* This document contains sections on transcribing vocal music, piano music, instrumental music, and how to format a paper for a music theory examination. We welcome comments, additions, clarifications and other feedback. The addendum can be downloaded from: <http://brailleaustralia.org/about-braille/music-braille/>

### Accreditation

Australia and New Zealand continue to jointly conduct the annual Trans-Tasman Proficiency Certificate examination in Unified English Braille in October of each year.

Since the last ICEB General Assembly Australia has recognised 26 candidates as having successfully passed this examination. These results comprise one High Distinction, nine distinctions, ten credits and six passes. They include 5 touch readers and 21 sighted candidates. Since 2008, Australia has awarded a total of 55 proficiency certificates.

The content of the examination has been consistent, comprising a passage of print to be transcribed into Braille, a passage of braille to be transcribed into print and a passage containing a range of errors, to be identified and brailled correctly.

## Conclusion

The last four years have been busy and rewarding for those involved with braille in Australia.

UEB is now fully implemented in Australia. It is well regarded and integrated into our lives – at home, in education, in employment and in our leisure activities. UEB is now part of our daily lives - there is no going back!

Our braille related publications are widely used. They set high standards for the production of braille throughout the country; so, the ABA is now truly Australia's authoritative voice on the development and maintenance of braille codes and specifications in our country.

Collaboration with our New Zealand colleagues to conduct the annual *Trans-Tasman Certificate of Proficiency in Unified English Braille* ensures an expectation of a high standard of braille production from transcribers as well as an understanding that the level we set is appropriate and acceptable outside our own shores.

With the development of Regional Braille Forums we are now far more inclusive of our young braille users – our leaders of tomorrow.

Through the efforts of ABA leaders, we have ensured that the words "braille", "progress" and "Australia" are often used together. We have lead the way in our adoption of UEB and will continue to meet the leadership challenges which come our way.

***Christine Simpson***

***Chair: Australian Braille Authority***

***May 2016***