#  Country Report – Australia

# For distribution at the 8th General Assembly of the

# International Council on English Braille

## Grand Millennium hotel Auckland New Zealand – May 2024

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## Introduction

Now under the leadership of Tristan Clare, the Australian Braille Authority (ABA) continues to promote braille through activities run by regional braille forums and affiliated groups – even braille bombing two Australian cities was among them.

ABA continues to maintain braille standards throughout Australia via the Trans-Tasman Certificate of Proficiency in Unified English Braille, conducted annually. ABA has also published two new sets of transcription guidelines along with some initial investigation into the creation of guidelines for the transcription of material in first nations languages.

Australia has state-based transcription and education departments as well as one national organisation providing services to people who are blind or have low Vision across the country. In the paragraphs below, we will highlight several of our organisations and the progress Australia has made in braille promotion and teaching over the past four years, as well as innovation in tactile diagrams and 3d printing designs across the sector. We even have braille books that are now commercially available.

## News from Organisations

### Vision Australia

Vision Australia is Australia's largest agency servicing clients who are blind or have low vision and has offices in most states.

In the last few years, Vision Australia has purchased a UV printer and Laser Cutter, and has created a wonderful new service offering for our clients that we have not been able to provide previously. The quality of the tactile images and the options to add raised lines and textures to almost any surface has enabled our clients to experience a new world of accessibility.

We have been working on some exciting projects with the QLD Eye Institute and the Art Gallery of NSW, improving access to the arts.

In Library news, As of February 1, 2024, the library holds in its collection 7,076 braille titles, 764 print braille titles, 5,724 music braille titles and 1039 Feelix kits. In total there are 13,564 braille titles in the collection.

99% of the braille children’s and young adult collection is now in Unified English Braille.

The LEGO braille collection now has 85 kits available for loan and is very popular with our young members.

The small collection of uncontracted braille for adults has increased to 35 titles in popular genres.

The Library has established a formal partnership with Indigenous Literacy Foundation. Its purpose is to distribute variety of Feelix sensory kits to playgroups based in remote and rural Northern Territory and Western Australia.

The Transcription Team continues to support the Global DAISY Music Braille Project as they move towards the implementation of the Make Braille translation software. Vision Australia transcriber, Christina Christensen is working with Dr Sarah Morley-Wilkins to coordinate the Music Braille producers Network.

Vision Australia Library, in partnership with Berbay Publishing, is proud to present our Big Vision children’s book series with braille and print, designed to encourage and inspire young people to explore their potential and believe what they can be.

We published three Big Vision picture book titles in 2023, which feature three diverse champions and their unique stories and perspectives as they embarked on their varied careers. Matt Formston is a champion Paralympian, Craig Shananan is the owner of ‘The Blind Chef’ café, and Nikki Hind has walked runways in Australia and internationally with her fashion label, Blind Grit. The books will be Australia's first commercially sold book in braille.

### Statewide Vision Resource Centre (Victoria)

Our braille teaching program Ozzie Dots is swimming along with recent sales to two very satisfied Canadian organisations; and we have had fruitful negotiations with ViewPlus regarding use of their embossers to emboss our files (Duxbury with PictureBraille). The Ozzie Dots Teacher Resource has been updated, downloadable from the SVRC website:

<https://www.svrc.vic.edu.au/ozzie-dots>

Recent projects have included building collections of:

* books by and featuring Australia's first nations people for primary and secondary students
* artworks as tactile diagrams, particularly those that are featured with audio description on art gallery websites – we plan to make this resource available as a free downloadable file via the SVRC website
* sexuality and relationship tactile diagrams which will also be available through the SVRC website as a free download

We continue to create 3-D printed kits to support the transition from real objects to tactile diagrams and have enjoyed being part of the Monash University ARC Linkage project investigating 3D prints.

SVRC is considering setting transcription request timelines for schools, particularly end of year requests to relieve the pressure on the transcription team and to encourage schools to take greater responsibility for ensuring their students have the resources to begin the new school year. Is this something other countries have considered?

## NSW Department of Education Vision Education

More than 800 students who are blind or have low vision are enrolled in NSW public schools.

Of particular note are the Inclusive scholarships we offer for a Master’s degree with specialisation in the area of the education of students who are blind or have low Vision.

## Next Sense

Since the launch of the UEB Online website and first UEB training programs at the Round Table Conference in May 2014, more than 23000 people have registered for the UEB Literacy training programs and 5000 for the three UEB mathematics programs.

### Launch of UEB competency exams

<https://uebonline.org/>

After the successful launch of two UEB literary training modules and three UEB mathematics training modules, we are pleased to launch the online competency examinations in UEB Literary and UEB Introductory Mathematics.

The online nature of the UEB examination and certification process provides a pathway to certification in Braille competency, regardless of geographical location–all that is required is a PC or laptop and internet connection. The exams are fully accessible and self-paced, with automated marking on completion of the exam. A single exam fee of AUD 70.00 is required, and candidates have the option to complete the exams at any time during the year. Successful candidates will receive a certificate of UEB competency and letter of results for the completed exam. Unsuccessful candidates will be offered the opportunity to re-sit the exam within a specified period at no extra charge.

### NextSense Courses and VISCON

<https://www.nextsense.org.au/professional-education>

We also offer a wide range of programs and courses for educators, therapists, health professionals, parents, carers and anyone else with an interest in the field.

Topics include the ins and outs of JAWS, Braille literacy, CVI Framework and more.

### Accessible Information Service

The AIS team designed and produced a braille and large print version of a book Tassie Rhymes for Little Tigers in collaboration with author/ illustrator Narelda Joy for a Tasmanian Charity Toast for Kids. This book was designed and created to include blind and low vision readers. Being the first of its kind, it will be free for parents of newborn babies in Tasmania. It will be available at libraries and for purchase at major bookstores all over Australia.

### Braille House

Braille House is a voluntary association of people specialising in tactual literacy to all states of Australia. They recently celebrated their 126th birthday.

Braille House is the only place in Australia where you can get monthly editions of magazines like Australian Women's Weekly, Australian Readers Digest and Australian Geographic.

We also hold a wide variety of publications from the United Kingdom, the USA and South Africa. There is also an online catalogue available for members.

Dickinson Memorial Literary Competition

The competition was started in 1921 by the “Queensland Musical, Literary and Self Aid Society for the Blind as an Essay Competition; the subject was “Self Reliance” and first prize in each category was One Guinea.

Since 2014 the competition has been proudly run exclusively by Braille House and there has been some amazing talent on display and we have found the competition in our 101st year to be exceptional.

## Queensland Department of Education’s Statewide Vision Impairment Service

### Queensland Braille Learning Progression (QBLP)

This has been produced to provide guidance to teachers to improve the braille literacy standards in Queensland schools. In response to the department’s survey of the needs of students who are blind or have low vision, the Braille Project was established in 2020, recognising that with the right support every student who uses braille can succeed.

An experienced teacher of braille was employed as the Head of Department (HOD) Braille Literacy, to lead this work. Through extensive consultation with every specialist teacher of students with vision impairment the HOD Braille Literacy gained a comprehensive understanding of the current status of braille education. The QBLP assists school teams to provide high-quality education supporting students who read and write braille to fully access, participate and engage with the curriculum on the same basis as their peers.

It is available here:

<https://education.qld.gov.au/student/Documents/qld-braille-learning-progression-assessment-tool.pdf>

### Queensland Braille Songs

Braille letter songs:

<https://soundcloud.com/visionimpairmentservices/sets/braille-letter-songs>

Braille contraction Songs:

<https://soundcloud.com/visionimpairmentservices/sets/braille-contractions-songs>

The 26 Braille letter songs include the braille dot numbers and alphabetic word sign contractions for each letter of the English alphabet. The 25 Braille contractions songs include initial contractions, strong contractions, lower wordsigns and number sign. Dot numbers are linked to consistent musical pitches to ensure that each song has a unique melody and to assist with the memorisation of each letter’s braille formation.

Christine Casey and Steve Sparrow’s voices can be heard. Steve, Christine and Rikki Chaplin also played the instruments.

## Queensland Braille Music Camp

In previous country reports I have described the National Braille Music Camp, which has been in existence for over 30 years. We now have an additional camp. In July 2021, Dotted Beats presented a proposal to Variety, a Children's Charity aimed at receiving financial support to deliver a Braille Music Camp for kids in Queensland. This camp is now in its third year, and has opened up to other states to fill the 30 spots available, along with adults who are braille users. It is also open to Music Teachers, Vision Support Teachers and Teacher-Aides as professional development.

The camp consists of daily braille music lessons as well as music workshops that offer participants the opportunity to learn unique instruments such as the Japanese Koto (which was originally only played by people with a vision impairment), group percussion and drum workshops, and DJing craft. A major focus of the camp also includes the teaching of accessible music computer software to best support students in their music lessons at school. In addition, choir and vocal coaching also comprise the makeup of the camp.

Further information can be found here:

<https://www.varietymusiccamp.com.au/>

## Australian Braille Authority.

The ABA held it’s elections in 2023, and Jordie Howell completed her third term as chair. Since the seventh General Assembly, we have farewelled some long standing members of the executive which include Josie Howse, Kathy Riessen and Leona Holloway. We welcomed our incoming chair Tristan Clare as well as some new members to our executive. Tristan works as a Braille Transcriber and proof-reader for NextSense. Tristan brings a detailed knowledge of UEB, braille maths and language to the ABA executive, and ABA is in very capable hands under Tristan’s leadership.

ABA has run various workshops at Round Table conferences over the past four years. Topics included braille music transcription options for users and transcribers, foreign language guidelines, braille in first nations languages, and braille relevance in the age of technology.

### Braille Bombing

In early 2022, a number of braille users and members of the public who wished to learn about braille, congregated at the Knowledge Week Display in the city of Melbourne. This was a joint initiative of the Monash University Inclusive Technology Group and ABA, run by Leona Holloway. After a brief description of the activity, 3D slate and styluses were provided to participants, and they were shown how to make labels which they then placed on signs through the city. The event attracted a lot of media attention and called for other states to replicate. Many people who were in council or places that needed to think about signing attended. Some people just came for a free and fun day out. In December 2022, this event was replicated in New South Wales.

An article on the day can be found here:

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/braille-bombers-boost-city-signage-for-the-sight-impaired-20220512-p5aksr.html>

### Regional Braille Forums

Currently ABA has one active regional braille Forum operating in Sydney, New South Wales. Sadly our Queensland Braille Forum is in recess at present. Its well-known Braille Club for students conducted some fantastic activities including a visit to the Queensland show in 2022 using braille maps to get around, and some online events when it was harder to meet in person.

### Sydney Regional Braille Forum

The Sydney Braille Forum enables members interested in the production, teaching or use of braille to come together to promote braille and to discuss braille related issues.

Although in 2020 our meetings were online, by 2023 we have held ‘hybrid’ meetings inclusive of both zoom and face-to-face and we engaged many new members across the state.

We hold Braille Awards Nights in November each year, celebrating our students’ achievements in the Braille Writing Competition. This annual competition is designed to promote braille literacy among our students and is continuing to grow in popularity every year. In 2022 our Awards Night was held online with 34 students. In 2023 we once again met in person with 35 students in attendance. They could choose from a story starter or write a creative story of their choice. They were also asked to identify braille errors in a passage to encourage proof reading of their work. The Braille marking committee is fortunate to have volunteer touch readers who were former participants in the competition.

### ABA Publications

We would like to highlight two new publications that have been published since the seventh General Assembly. The Australian Braille Authority Guidelines for Foreign Language Material 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. Guidelines for transcribing Chinese braille (UEB) has also been a collaboration between transcribers nationally. ABA plans to launch this at this year’s Round Table Conference in May.

These publications and many more resources are available for download from

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

### 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. Since the seventh ICEB General Assembly in 2020, 8 candidates have been accredited with the UEB Proficiency Certificate. There were lower numbers owing to the fact that we could not run the examination in 2020 due to COVID restrictions and postage delays.

## Conclusion

It is truly exciting to see how access to braille is changing and improving in Australia. With the invention of UV printing, we can now put our hands on photographs that include colour and tactile elements, and through dedicated and passionate colleagues, we have brought an awareness of braille to the streets of Melbourne and Sydney. It will be exciting to be part of the development of braille codes in first nations languages here in Australia, alongside increased collaboration with New Zealand and other braille authorities internationally. I look forward to seeing how creatively braille can be an even bigger part of Australia.

**Jordie Howell**

**Immediate Past Chair: Australian Braille Authority**