Copyright Agency Limited is a copyright collecting society. Copyright collecting societies are organisations formed by copyright holders to act as agents for the copyright owners to exercise their rights individually.

The development of mass media technology has led to the development of copyright collecting societies. The technology encourages the widespread and transparent use of copyright material it is impossible for individual owners of the copyright in works to determine by whom, in what quantities and on what terms their works are being used. It is also impossible for each user of the material to secure a licence from each individual copyright owner to legally use their works.

A collective organisation representing copyright owners is able to:
- Strenuously defend the interests of copyright, both for the copyright owner and the user of copyright, and
- Enhance the bargaining power of individual copyright owners.

In short, the existence of copyright collecting societies makes it possible for copyright owners to control and receive remuneration for the mass exploitation of their works.

Copyright collecting societies first developed in the field of musical works due to the impact of technology such as phonographs and radio broadcasting on the ways in which musical works were used. For much of the century the position of the holders of copyright in literary and dramatic print works was, by comparison with that of rights holders of musical works, relatively secure. Performances of print works could be reproduced by the use of expensive printing technology or copying by hand. The restrictions on each of these methods of reproduction were not severe. The control of reproduction of the works remained in the hands of the copyright owners. Until technology made reproduction of those works too easy, there was no need for rightsholders in print works in print to act collectively and as a consequence, no pressure for copyright societies to be formed.

In 1956, the Illegal Copying of Printed Reproduction Act, as the Copyright Act 1956 was then known, came into operation. This act necessitated the formation of what is now known as the Copyright Agency Limited. The Copyright Act 1956 was introduced to the Parliament in 1954 with the objective of protecting the interests of copyright owners and the public. The act was passed with the support of a cross-party majority of MPs. The act provided that there should be three statutory bodies responsible for the protection of copyright in print and digital works:

- The Copyright Agency Limited (CAL)
- The Broadcasting Standards Commission
- The Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA)

Although the Franki Committee recognised that by introducing a statutory licence for copyright owners to exploit the right for educational institutions to copy without providing a streamlined means for copyright owners to secure a licence for the use of their works they also felt that the needs of education could not wait for a voluntary licence system to be established.

The Committee foresaw the possibility that an organisation such as Copyright Agency Limited would be formed to collectively administer the rights of authors and publishers copied in education and libraries. At the time, there was no statutory licence for the copying of print works. The Committee noted that a voluntary licence for the copying of print works had been introduced into the Copyright Act 1981. The licence required every educational institution in Australia to keep detailed records of all copying of print works. The licence was designed to provide a straightforward means of ascertaining the actual copying that occurred in copy centres.

The records were to be kept in author alphabetical order. This was required on the basis that authors and publishers would vitiate institutions and claim that their works had not been used.

Quite soon after its introduction it became apparent that the licence did not work satisfactorily from the perspective of either the user or the owner of copyright. Copyright owners found it difficult to visit each of the educational institutions in Australia (estimated at 15,000) to claim a fee and educational institutions found it impossible to keep the detailed records required by the legislation.

However, the statutory licence had a number of valuable effects. It required everyone engaged in education in Australia to keep records of their copying of books and other print works which had been published. The records were required to be kept in alphabetical order. This required the institutions to keep detailed records of all copying of print works. The records were to be kept in author alphabetical order. This was required on the basis that authors and publishers would vitiate institutions and claim that their works had not been used.

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