BETTER, MORE ACCESSIBLE, LIBRARIES FOR ALL IN AUSTRALIA: PROGRESS AND POTENTIAL

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Australia has four major library sectors, public, academic, school and special. All of those sectors have major strengths and rate well by world standards. Many new and redeveloped buildings have been constructed in them. The academic libraries have been strongly focused on the information/learning commons concept, electronic resources and information literacy education. Public libraries are now available to everyone in Australia, and are receiving increasing attention and new buildings as multidimensional centres for community learning capacity growing. School libraries have many new buildings and a strong focus on information literacy education but they often now have inadequate teacher librarian and library technician staff and resources. School library needs were reviewed during 2011 by a committee of inquiry of the Australian federal parliament. Special libraries have experienced cutbacks and institutional changes and mergers but the sector continues to innovate and grow in areas such as law libraries. Australia has the benefit of a strong multisectoral professional library association based in the national capital Canberra, and which is helping all sectors to address areas such as the ageing and education of the profession, library education, professional development, and advocacy. Australia also unusually has a national association for Friends of Australian Libraries to focus citizen advocacy for stronger investment in public libraries in particular. A challenge for the Australian library sectors is to become better informed about the issues and many users they have in common, and to collaborate in practice and in advocacy for better, more accessible, libraries for all.


With over 7.5million km², Australia has the same area as the continental USA and is 14 times larger than metropolitan France. Eighty five per cent of its population of only 23million – projected to at least double by 2050 because of a high birth rate compared with most European countries, and immigration – lives along or close to its 25,760km coastline. That population is largely urbanized. Indigenous Australians comprise 2.3 per cent of the population, and over 160 nationalities are represented in its multicultural population. The country’s large inland areas, with their many small towns and villages, represent a major challenge in the delivery of educational, library and health services.

As the world’s 14th largest, the Australian economy is service and commodities dominated. There is low unemployment, and skills shortages, including in the library sector. It has largely escaped the impact of the global financial crisis.

The Australian library sector

This comprises public, university, technical and further education and school libraries, and special libraries in private sector organizations and in local, state and federal government departments. The sector accounts for about AUD$2.8billion in annual recurrent expenditure, of which the public library system is the largest at AUD$880million.

Details of all of Australia’s academic, public, joint use, and special libraries are to be found in the ninth edition 2009/11 of a print directory Australian libraries: the essential directory. Information about over 5000 Australian libraries is also accessible at the National Library of Australia’s website. A comprehensive critical history of Australian libraries from 1830-1995 has been published.

The following paper commences with short commentaries about the academic, school and special library sectors. It then has a longer commentary on Australia’s public library sector, which is now accessible to everyone in Australia.

University libraries

University libraries in Australia support 41 institutions. Those universities are largely funded by the federal government, and six of them are usually included in the top 100 rankings of universities worldwide. Most of them are now multicampus, with campuses sometimes hundreds of kilometres apart. Several are multisectoral with the Technical and Further Education Sector. Such distances present special challenges and costs for their institutions and their libraries. Some of the universities have developed great expertise in distance education and online teaching, and their libraries typically offer outstanding support to remote students both within and outside of Australia. Examples include the libraries of the University of South Australia, Deakin University and Charles Sturt University. The Charles Sturt University has the largest library school in Australia, and many of its librarianship students
are distance education students living anywhere in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. There has been for several years a national borrowing scheme between the university libraries which permits distance education students to freely borrow from a university library close to where they live, rather than relying just on their enrolled institution’s library to send them items through the postal system or electronically.

Other key developments in the university libraries in the last two decades have been a renewal of staffing structures focused on the employment of academic librarians who work very closely with faculty; extensive investment in new buildings, automation, rfid and electronic resources; responding to a large growth in masters and doctoral programs, research, and international students; and a shift to the information/learning commons concept partnering with faculty in improving student learning, with a focus on information literacy development as a critical graduate quality.

The information literacy emphasis owes much to pioneering work by teacher librarians and the Australian School Library Association (ASLA), and the series of annual information literacy conferences held during the 1990s by the University of South Australia Library – and to Australian librarian and researcher Dr Christine Bruce, and her seminal and internationally recognised 1997 book The seven faces of information literacy.\(^4\) This was followed in 2001 by the adoption by the Council of Australian University Librarians of Australian and New Zealand information literacy standards,\(^5\) and the development of the Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy.\(^6\)

**Technical and Further Education (Tafe) libraries**

These support a diverse range of over 60 multicampus institutes, which are usually geographically defined and may have great distances between campuses in regional areas of Australia. There is also an increasing number of accredited small private colleges. These tend to be limited to programs such as business, computing, hospitality, and English and usually have only small libraries.

The Tafe institutes are similar to community colleges in the US and Canada, and further education colleges in the UK, and generally award qualifications up to the level of advanced diploma, which is below that of bachelor degree within the Australian Qualifications Framework. Tafe study can often be used as part credit towards bachelor degree university programs, and 10 institutes now confer their own degree level awards and post graduate diplomas. This practice is controversial as it blurs once clearly defined boundaries between the tertiary education sectors. It has, however, required numbers of the Tafe institutes to improve the status, staffing and funding of their libraries. Whilst every Tafe campus, except for the very smallest in rural areas, will have a staffed library with a qualified librarian or library technician, the role and status of Tafe libraries remains a pedagogical and funding challenge and quite variable across Australia. There are no national standards for their provision. The better staffed and funded libraries have, however, been progressive in information literacy and information/learning commons developments; partnering with teaching staff; and in inclusive and caring responses to large numbers of mature age, international, migrant and refugee students who may lack confidence in learning and fluency in English. A number of Tafe libraries, especially in regional and rural areas, are joint use with the local public library or university campus library.

**School libraries**

Schooling in Australia starts with a kindergarten or preparatory year followed by 12 years of primary and secondary school. Most schools are coeducational.

There are about 7000 primary and 2000 secondary schools in the public and private sectors. Schooling is constitutionally the responsibility of the state and territory governments, but all schools receive directly or indirectly considerable federal funding. Per capita student access to computers is among the highest in the world. Almost all schools have a library, although many primary schools in particular may only have a part time librarian, or no qualified librarian at all.

In 2011 the quality and needs of Australia’s school libraries underwent national scrutiny by a committee of inquiry of the Australian federal parliament. This inquiry received nearly 400 submissions,\(^7\) which showed great and well informed concern about the deficiencies of Australian school libraries. It followed a campaign by the nation’s teacher librarians, library associations, education unions and others to highlight the decline over the last 20 years in the
employment of dually qualified teacher librarians particularly in state public schools; the imminent retirement of many teacher librarians; a reduction in library education opportunities for classroom teachers to acquire a librarianship qualification to become teacher librarians to replace those who are now retiring; the low level of employment of paraprofessional library technicians to free teacher librarians to collaborate with classroom teachers in information literacy, teaching and learning; and in the levels of funding available for school libraries to provide a wide range of up to date print and electronic resources.

From the 1970s to the 1990s Australia, Canada and parts of the USA such as California led the world in investing in school libraries, in dually qualified and pedagogically knowledgeable teacher librarians, and in the importance of information literacy for effective learning. None of those countries have been immune to sometimes severe funding and staffing cutbacks, and short sighted educational administrators who have ignorantly or conveniently concluded that information technology, the internet and electronic resources render school libraries and teacher librarians redundant. In the case of Australia, a catalyst for the national campaign by the teacher librarians and others, was the very large current investment by the federal government in its ‘Building the educational revolution’ strategy. Many new school libraries, especially in primary schools, have been built, redeveloped, or planned. This has occurred, however, without commitments by the state governments to improved staffing and resourcing of their school libraries. The lack of acceptance of responsibility, collaboration, and cost shifting, between the three levels of Australian government – federal, state, local – continue to constrain better recognition and support for both school and public libraries.

Special libraries
In Australia, special libraries have experienced similar levels of questioning of their need and roles in the internet age as in other developed countries. Only the most progressive parts of Australian business, industry and government support research and development, and recognise that decisions are as good as the information on which they are based – and that the internet is only one such source.

In the business, industrial, government and even the health sectors special libraries continue to experience contraction, restructuring or even closure sometimes as an outcome of company or government department mergers. Nonetheless the sector, which has about 1200 libraries, is innovative and resilient. It employs some of the most capable and networking committed library professionals in the country, especially in the growing numbers of law libraries, and in health and accountancy libraries. The majority of Australian special libraries, as elsewhere in the world, have small staff numbers. However of particular note is the high reputation – for independent proaction in providing analyses of trends and issues – of the large Australian Parliamentary Library in Canberra. Although its analyses may discomfit them, Australia’s national politicians and democracy are well served by it, as are generally its state politicians by their parliamentary libraries.

Public libraries
The Australian public library sector comprises the National Library, the six large state reference libraries and two Territory reference libraries, 550 local public library systems with a total of 1520 static branches and mobile libraries, and specialist library services for the vision and hearing impaired. Its totality is detailed in the 2010 eighth edition of the Directory of Australian public libraries. This has been described in the US Public library quarterly as the world’s most comprehensive record of a nation’s public library system. Of those libraries, only the digitally innovative National Library is funded by the federal government. The others are the funding responsibility of the state and territory governments, in the case of local public libraries usually in partnership with, and managed by, local (municipal) government. The unique multidimensional responsibilities and ‘cradle to grave’ usage of public libraries means that in different jurisdictions governmental responsibility for them may fall into education, or more usually politically weak arts or community services portfolios. This is part of the challenge in achieving better recognition and funding of them.

The sector is used by 60 per cent of the population, has nearly 1500 service points, over 8000 staff, and lends about 200 million items each year. In the last 10 years it has been gaining an increasing recognition and dynamic as a building block of
social capital; as the community’s ‘third place’ after school or work and home; as a response to the needs of 21st century society for connection, learning and capacity building; and as a focus for urban regeneration. It is now arguably the most interesting, innovative – but challenged – library sector in Australia. The sector therefore has the potential to contribute to the life quality and wellbeing of more people, from ‘cradle to grave’, than any of the other library sectors.

However, unlike New Zealand which had free public libraries from the 1890s, Australia came late – large regional and rural parts of it very late – to a recognition of the importance of investing in free local public libraries for all people of all ages and all circumstances. One reason was the continued existence of the subscription libraries in mechanics’ institutes or schools of arts long after those 19th century institutions had slid into terminal decline, and had been rejected in the United Kingdom and the United States in favour of publicly funded free libraries from the mid 1850s. In Australia the subscription libraries made no provision for children, and attracted use by only 3 per cent of the population. Another reason was the weakness of local government, which often served very sparse populations. A third reason was lack of leadership by the state governments, content to fund – often poorly – the large capital city state reference libraries. These libraries in some cases provided a free lending service to residents of the capital city and book boxes sent by train to country borrowers.

As a consequence the 1934 Munn-Pitt survey of Australian libraries10 funded by the US Carnegie Corporation, jolted the state governments into action by famously stating

As a whole Australia was better provided with local libraries in 1880 than it is today. Almost every city and large town contains a decadent institute or school of arts, many of which give evidence of having had a former period of usefulness. It is pathetic to observe the pride and complacency with which local committees exhibit wretched little institutes which have long since become ‘cemeteries of old and forgotten books’.

Although most states soon enacted legislation to address this situation, in 1946 British public librarian Lionel McColvin in a survey of Australian libraries could see little real progress. As late as 1976 the report of a national review of public libraries11 commissioned by the Australian federal government found that many communities in regional and rural Australia, in particular, still did not have local public libraries.

Very much has changed since 1976. From 2008 every local government authority in Australia has been providing or supporting a free public library service for its community, in partnership with its state or territory government. This has included the development of knowledge centres in remote Aboriginal communities, and in the state of South Australia in particular the development of a large number of joint use school/public libraries in smaller rural communities.

Almost all people in Australia now have access to a local free public library, and through that library to the full library resources of the nation. This is a significant achievement, in a relatively short time of 30 years. The United States, with a much longer public library tradition, and with a similar area and much larger population than Australia, still has communities with no public libraries.

In 1956 the USA, UK, Denmark and New Zealand were identified as the leading public library nations.12 Australia was then a very long way from qualifying. Just over 50 years later a list of the world’s leading public library nations would need to now include Australia, along with the above four countries, the other Scandinavian countries, The Netherlands, Canada, and Singapore.

The reasons for Australia’s inclusion include:

- the nationwide accessibility and interlibrary loan facility of the free public library system
- the cooperation between the National Library, the State Libraries, and the local public libraries
- the very high (60 per cent of the population) usage and contingent valuation of public libraries
- a high number of generally successful joint use school/public libraries and other joint use libraries, particularly in rural areas13
- high investment in attractive new, redeveloped and larger library buildings, which has been informed by People places,14 an outstanding guide for new public library buildings published by the State Library of NSW
- a high level of technological provision and innovation, including free internet and wifi
• innovative programs to support early childhood development, literacy and young people
• innovative language and other programs to support migrant and refugee populations from around the world. Of particular note is the collaborative MyLanguage,\textsuperscript{15} which provides access to search engines, web directories and news in over 60 languages
• nationwide library support for people with vision and hearing impairment
• following the UK lead, an increasing ‘core library business’ reader development focus in how collections are arranged and exploited, and in staff training\textsuperscript{16}
• the existence since 1994 of Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA),\textsuperscript{17} as only the world’s second national organisation to foster over 170 Friends of Libraries groups to advocate for better public libraries, as the voice of all users and citizens
• a strong multisectoral professional association, the Australian Library and Information Association.\textsuperscript{18} This is based in the national capital and represents the interests of all library sectors to government. It has a strong professional development focus, and has been particularly active in recent years representing public libraries, including in 2010 convening a first Australian Public Libraries Summit,\textsuperscript{19} and in 2012 leading Australia’s first National Year of Reading\textsuperscript{20}
• Public Libraries Australia as a national advocacy focus for public library managers and other public library supporters\textsuperscript{21}
• investment in world class research to demonstrate to citizens and library funders the return on investment, achievements and potential of public libraries to meet a wide range of community needs, and contribute to many governmental policy outcomes\textsuperscript{22}
• the publication for over 20 years of one of only a very few professional journals worldwide specifically for public libraries\textsuperscript{23}
• the publication early in 2011 of new evidence based national standards for public libraries.\textsuperscript{24}

The challenges
There is much which is positive about all of the Australian library sectors. There are also major concerns, particularly in the school libraries and Tafe sector. A long standing issue, into which the Australian Librarian and Information Association has been putting considerable effort, is professional succession planning. Many library professionals (librarians and teacher librarians) and paraprofessionals (library technicians), as in other developed countries, have retired or will retire soon. There are already instances where it has been difficult to find qualified replacements for them, including at senior levels. This issue has been compounded, especially for the school library sector, by the closure in recent years of a number of library schools in universities.

There are also concerns about the depth, quality and outcomes of remaining library school programs. The public library sector in particular does not have enough funding to employ the number of librarians and other professionals such as youth workers needed to achieve its full services, learning and programming potential for local communities.

For the library sector which impacts on more people than any other, the major challenge is therefore to gain for public libraries better funding than their current meagre 10c per Australian per day, or less than AUD$40 per annum. This is only about one third per capita of best practice countries such as Denmark. Australia, as a wealthy country, should be doing much better. The whole of the nation’s public library sector and its supporters now have the collaborative mechanisms, information base and evidence of return on investment to confidently make this case in the years ahead.

The current difficulty with public library funding in Australia is largely consequent on the state governments reducing over the last 20 years the real and relative funding of their public library systems, and effectively shifting library costs to local government. If those governments had maintained their funding partnership with local government, the annual investment in Australian public libraries would now be nearly twice the current AUD$880million per annum. But they have not, with most now contributing only about 15 per cent of library funding and local government often struggling to provide the other 85 per cent.

This suggests lack of recognition by the Australian states of their overall constitutional responsibility for the performance of their public library systems. They recognise that responsibility in other community critical areas such as health, school
education, aged care, family and community welfare. The question now being asked by advocates of better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia, is why not for their public libraries — the performance of which impacts on all of those state responsibilities, and more.

In conclusion
There is one other challenge which remains to be faced by all of the library sectors in Australia, but which receives — as doubtless in other countries — little attention. This is the overall lack of understanding and collaboration between the sectors. Those sectors inevitably have many users in common. They should have a shared vision and interest in not only providing what those users want, but also in increasing their numbers, and in promoting their learning and information literacy as critical to the sustenance of democratic society.

There are good, but too few, examples of resource access and program collaboration and partnership across the Australian library sectors. These include the growing number of joint use and colocated libraries, and in regional areas in particular between the local university, Tafe, public, school and special libraries. A few excellent examples are to be found of collaboration between local school and public libraries although Australia, unlike Denmark, has no legislation requiring them to cooperate. School/public library cooperation tends to be constrained by attitudinal, staffing and logistical factors. This is unfortunate, as one third of public users in Australia are young children and students.

The limited awareness between the library sectors of their roles, achievements, needs, and challenges inhibits advocacy towards better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia. It remains an area requiring a strong preservice library education and professional development focus.

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