18 August 2023

Submission to the Interim Report of the Universities Accord Panel

Executive Summary

The Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) is the national voice for the 15-million Australians who are members of and love their public libraries. Australia's public library network is a national treasure that consists of more than 1,700 local libraries in nearly every municipality in Australia. The mission of Australia's public libraries is to provide lifelong-learning opportunities to their communities, and they are used extensively and intensively by Australians of all ages looking for support while they are engaged in formal and informal education.

Australia's public libraries are the ideal implementation partner for the Government's planned expansion of the University Study Hubs network. Rather than investing funding to acquire physical spaces, fit out facilities, purchase technology, and employ and train staff, it makes far more sense to invest to upgrade and enhance the capabilities of existing public libraries in the localities where the Government would like to see the greatest impact regarding increased access and accessibility to higher education.

Public libraries already contain all the core elements that are required to serve as Tertiary Study Hubs, and indeed have been serving informally in this role for years. They are vibrant locations of lifelong learning, and they are the single most popular and trusted services provided by local governments. By investing allocated funding into upgrades and enhancements of public libraries, it is likely the Government's funding will go several times further, serving many more locations, multiples of students, and have a far greater impact than if it decides to "start from scratch" as it has with its Regional University Centres to date.

The following submission explains why the smartest approach to solving the number one problem as identified by the Accord is for the Government to invest taxpayer dollars in Australia's existing public library infrastructure to enhance it for the benefit of the most educationally disadvantaged members of our nation.

Background Facts and Supporting Data:

The Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) is the national voice for the 15-million Australians who are members of their local public library. Australia's public library network delivers more educational outcomes (for people of all ages) and social and economic benefits per dollar invested than any other institution. More than 1,700 local, public libraries in nearly every community and local government area in Australia provide a tremendous diversity of lifelong learning experiences at a national cost that is less than the budget of a single metropolitan university. The more than 500 public libraries in rural, regional and remote locations, as well as the hundreds in low-SES and ex-urban geographies, can play an essential role in helping the nation achieve the Accord's ambitions.

The Accord's most important mission, as stated in its Interim Report, is to make access to higher education more equitable by making it more accessible to disadvantaged Australians, including First Nations, rural, regional, and remote, and low-SES communities. And yet for all the reforms that took place as a result of the Bradley Review (2008), the Interim Report notes that "The system is inequitable. Opportunity and attainment are influenced by location and student background. Higher education participation rates for low SES and regional, rural and remote students have gone backwards since 2016. First Nations participation has increased but remains around 40% below population parity." (page 24)

Priority Action 1 (page 6) seeks to address this inequity by expanding the current network of 34 Regional University Centres with 20 additional Regional University Study Hubs and 14 Suburban University Study Hubs in order to bring higher education to students who have been disadvantaged by geography, for those "living in regional, remote and outer metropolitan and peri urban areas where accessing a physical campus can be difficult." This is a noble and worthwhile purpose, and it builds upon the existing Regional University Centres that have been funded by the federal government over the last several years.

FOLA's Recommendation

Australia's public libraries are a remarkable national asset that deliver documented and measurable educational benefits and value to nearly every community in the nation. For every dollar invested in public libraries, research has confirmed that the community benefit is up to $5 dollars or more of economic return.[1] Notably, they are funded mostly by local government (with the exception of Tasmania), with modest and declining support from state governments, and historically no support from the federal government. Australia's public libraries are generally overlooked when it comes to national priorities such as supporting the expansion of access to tertiary education.

And yet nearly every one of the 1,700 public libraries in Australia – and certainly the vast majority of those in the geographies the Accord has identified as being of high priority for increasing participation rates in higher education – already possesses most, if not all, the assets and infrastructure to serve as additional Regional University Centres. (Australia compares modestly to international peers in terms of its investment in public libraries. The Nordic countries, for example, show the strong correlation of public library investment and broader societal education outcomes.) Specifically, nearly every public library in Australia possesses:

- IT infrastructure
- Study spaces

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[1] https://www.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/assets/hq/library_roi.pdf

- Student support services (not all)
- Academic skills support (not all)
- A network of like-minded peers (1,700 peer public libraries)
- Other campus-style facilities[2]

It is clear from consulting work conducted on behalf of the Department of Education, Skills and Employment by Deloitte Access Economics that an enormous amount of time and treasure has been expended identifying potential future locations for Regional University Centres. This work, while no doubt of value, takes a deficit model approach to identifying promising locations by attempting to quantify a community's "readiness" for investment in a RUC. Readiness is defined as having "community aliveness" as well as "aspirations, capabilities & resource," a framework that necessarily relegates lower ranked communities as lacking in aspirations, capabilities and resources.[3]

On 18 July 2023 the Minister for Education announced $66.9 million to establish up to 20 new Regional University Study Hubs and up to 14 Suburban University Study Hubs.[4] This amounts to approximately $1.97-million per new University Study Hub. FOLA commends this commitment by the Minister and strongly encourages consideration be given to using the allocated funding to upgrade and enhance public libraries in relevant geographies to deliver on the Accord's objectives. The benefits of this approach are many, including:

- Public libraries already have physical spaces, technology, including hardware, software, broadband, Wi-Fi, and subscriptions to many online databases.
- Public libraries are open to the public, and depending on local circumstances and budgets, may be open up to seven days a week, including some evening hours.
- Public libraries are staffed by trained professionals and highly qualified staff, frequently in possession of bachelor's or advanced degrees in library management and science. Public library staff are generally more highly skilled in information technology than any other public-facing public servants.
- Public libraries are already vibrant centres of community learning and engagement. They are almost always located in town centres, close to public transport and with ample public parking.
- Public libraries are amongst the safest places in communities for all individuals and groups.

Taking this approach will ensure that the Government's investment will:

- Go much further and increase access for many more students in more geographies, than its historic approach with RUCs. An investment of, for example, $500,000 to upgrade and enhance tertiary learner support services at existing public libraries would mean that, with the same budget, up to 136 additional Study Hubs could be delivered, allowing the Government to meet the Accord's objective of scalable solutions to problems much more quickly.

- Serve as an exemplar of how public libraries, which are already serving the needs of local communities in myriad ways, can be scaled up to solve previously intractable problems, including access to education, information, services, and community building activities.

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[2] Regional University Centres Program, 2022 Funding Round Briefing Session, 3rd March 2022, page 3.
[3] Informing future locations for Regional University Centres: Companion report to the Regional Needs Model/Dashboard and Regional Readiness Factsheets. Deloitte Access Economics. November 2021. P.17.
[4] https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education/support-students/suburban-university-study-hubs

- Serve as an exemplar of how the Government can partner directly with public libraries and their local governments (and the state government in the case of Tasmania) to deliver outcomes and build public trust in all levels of government.

- Avoid the risk of creating "white elephants," that is, new infrastructure that is under-utilised. A stand-alone Regional University Study Hub will be exclusionary in that it will only be available to tertiary students, and it no doubt will take time, effort, and treasure to build up a reasonable utilitisation level. In contrast, public libraries are existing, dynamic, engaging, and welcoming community learning hubs. As just one example, in 2021-2, Australians booked more than 500,000 hours of meeting spaces at public libraries.[5]

More than a decade ago Open Universities Australia (OUA), at the time Australia's largest online higher education provider, piloted a program called the OUA Connect Library Program, in which it partnered with public libraries to provide local support for students studying online via OUA's partner universities. We have included a paper that describes the project, its impact and results, Enhancing Online Learning: Public Libraries Supporting Student Engagement and Success." The project was, according to OUA, highly successful, though it faltered for two reasons: OUA's business was undercut by its member universities launching their own online course delivery platforms, and OUA had never invested financially in the public libraries it was asking to deliver services to its students.

The President of FOLA, Jack Goodman, published a paper entitled "Library, community campus, learning hub?" in 2015. That paper, published in Analysis & Policy Observatory, concluded that public libraries are ideally positioned to support the changing nature of higher education in Australia, including its trends of widening participation and online/hybrid course delivery.

Finally, the Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association in 2019 published a study entitled 'Working together': Public libraries supporting rural, regional, and remote low-socioeconomic students in partnership with universities. This paper provides further evidence of the capacity of public libraries, when properly augmented and invested in, to deliver the kind of local, face-to-face learning experiences that help students build a sense of belonging and encourage them to believe they can successfully pursue their course.

All three papers are included with this submission.

Conclusion:

The Accord can deliver a smart, economically efficient, scalable solution that brings university education opportunities to under-serviced communities, via the nation's extensive, equitable, and accessible public library network.

Supplemental documents:

'Working together': Public libraries supporting rural, regional, and remote low-socioeconomic student success in partnership with universities. By Emma Power, Helen Partridge, Sue Own, Kathryn Kelly & Sandra Jeffries

Enhancing Online Learning: Public Libraries Supporting Student Engagement and Success, a report by Cathy Stone, Open Universities Australia

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[5] NSLA – Australian Public Libraries Statistical Report, 2021-22. Attached to this submission.

Library, community campus, learning hub? By Jack Goodman, president, Friends of Libraries Australia

Australian Public Libraries Statistical Report 2021-22 Highlights. Published by National and State Libraries Australasia and the Australian Public Library Alliance.

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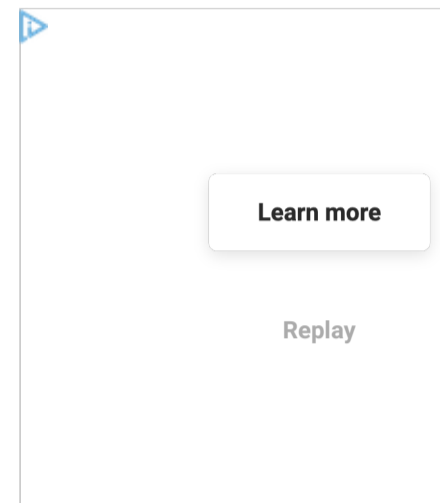
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Jack Goodman

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R E S O U R C E S

D E S C R I P T I O N

Ten million Australians are members of their local public library, and one million are enrolled at university[1],[2],[3]. However, in 2015, public libraries and universities are sharing a challenge – adapt or decline. In particular, physical resources, branches, and campuses are cost-centres that seem to be increasingly at odds with public demand and against worldwide trends toward online study. Jack Goodman advocates here for the deliberate collaboration between two of Australia's biggest social and economic engines.

A version of this paper was first presented at the "AUSLIB Beyond The Walls Public Libraries In Australia And New Zealand: Engaging Their Communities" conference, Adelaide, 26 March 2015.

Libraries and universities, shared transformation

A few days ago I attended the national convention of Universities Australia. This is an annual event, held in Canberra, at which upwards of 600 senior university academics gather – Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors, etc. – to share their thoughts on the future of the sector. What is normally a relatively genteel event, featuring fancy food and drink and relatively little "conferencing" in relation to networking and "catching up" time, was different this year. Why? Our universities are undergoing what may be their most radical period of transformation since they assumed their modern forms over the last several centuries.

In Australia, this process is being accelerated –at least potentially – by the current Government, which is hoping to begin privatising our 39 public institutions. At the conference the Prime Minister sent his views in the form of a 2-minute video to the conferees, while the Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, floridly presented his views to the delegates in an after-dinner speech at Parliament House. And finally, the next morning, shadow minister Kim Carr provided an alternative view – again in powerfully strident tones – of what the future of our university sector should look like.

More like this

S U R V E Y

SPEC Kit 355: Campus-wide entrepreneurship (July 2017)

Regardless of your view of the current debate – and it's been going on for so long now that it's likely most of us have lost track of what the Government's current position is – there's something far bigger and more important that's happening to our unis than whether their funding model changes. It's the digitisation of education.

Keeping up with social expectations

What does this mean? By now we're all well and truly tired, I am sure, of hearing about the impact the Internet, the World Wide Web, computers, smart phones, tablets, and now wearable tracking devices are having on our daily lives. We've all heard the stories about how technology has overwhelmed long-lived parts of our economy – including books, music, movies, newspapers, magazines, databases, and more. What's happening now is that technology's impact is accelerating across a wider range of more complex, higher-level human endeavours, including health care and education.

Students aren't on campus anymore

For our universities, this means that while enrolments are at their highest levels ever, the fastest growing campuses in our nation are invisible. That is, online enrolments in "cloud campuses" (as many unis are calling their digital offerings) are rapidly becoming the most popular way to study. The reasons for this are obvious. The consequences are not so clear, and they're quite concerning if you're an Australian uni. One thing anyone who's been on a uni campus recently will know is this: student attendance at the traditional uni lecture is down. Way down. It's not uncommon for academics to report that, by week 3 or 4 of a semester, fewer than 20 per cent of enrolled students are attending weekly lectures. The nation's lecture theatres are not so much venues for information transmission but glorified echo chambers.

And once a student begins to study in the cloud, what becomes of them? This is where the world as we have known it turns upside down. Because whether a student in Adelaide, or Alice Springs, or Atherton happens to be studying at their local uni or another cloud campus across the country, or even across the ocean, is entirely impossible to predict. Just in our own backyard, Flinders, UniSA and Adelaide are now competing directly with 36 other Australian universities, as well as hundreds of private providers in Australia and overseas – let's say at least 500 English language public and private institutions in the US, UK, Canada, and elsewhere.

What does all this have to do with public libraries? A lot. In fact, it should be telling us two things: First, public libraries are, without a doubt, in the midst of a challenge similar to that of universities. Second, transformative crises such as what I have described above also represent great opportunities for those of us who are willing to embrace change. How so? Read on.

Transformative crises as opportunities

Let's pause for a moment and consider how libraries have changed in the last 20+ years? Let's cast our memories back to 1995, when Paul Keating was prime minister of Australia, our population was less than 18-million, and the Internet was, effectively, a novelty. Personal computers were large, white boxes, sometimes with CD-ROM drives (DVDs didn't hit the market for another year) that cost about $3,000. If you wanted to get an Internet connection, you needed to have some technical know-how, a modem, a spare phone-line, and a copy of Netscape Navigator or Mosaic. You almost certainly didn't go to a library to get online, since few public libraries had Internet connections, and there wouldn't have been much to do online anyway as there were very few websites. And needless to say, there was no Google, no smartphones, no Facebook, no broadband, no iPads. The world was, indeed a very different place.

What is the real mission?

What does the landscape look like for public libraries in 2015? Much like universities, libraries are experiencing a persistent and growing threat to what has historically been their core mission: providing communities with access to reading material and reader development. We report the statistics to our managers on a monthly basis and the numbers speak for themselves. Loans are, almost across the board, down from their peaks 3 or 4 years ago, and the trend

line shows no sign of change. Patrons who have been libraries' best customers for years now have access to near limitless reading and listening material on their smartphones and reading tablets, whether they're borrowing that material from their library or downloading it for no or nominal cost. Traditional databases – with a couple of unique exceptions – are under similar pressures. This should come as no surprise when the vast majority of queries from our community are quite easily resolved via Google, Wikipedia, and the increasingly impressive network of well-edited and sourced free online content.

What libraries do well; unique strengths

One thing we can say, without exception, that libraries do well, have always done well, and will likely continue to do well far into the future is run early childhood reading programs. We don't need more presentations, reports, studies, and analyses of story times for children and the benefits for both parents and babies. We know they work, they're well attended, and they meet an important and irreplaceable community need. What works so well about these types of baby/toddler/children's programs: First, libraries possess something increasingly rare in our heavily privatised world: public spaces that are comfortable, inviting, and designed for informal learning. Second, they're delivering an experience that isn't easily replaced by technology. Humans are social and as much as we seem to have an endless addiction to socialising online, we still crave face-to-face engagement, and we need spaces that are free and well-resourced, to deliver the quality of life experiences that help equalise access to societal goods that all members of our communities seek.

Taking advantage of strengths: space, staff, social inclusion

Can we extrapolate anything from these facts? As I've suggested many times in the past, if librarians and supporters of libraries were to think like entrepreneurs, we'd focus on the things libraries do best and try to find ways to build on those strengths, while mitigating any obvious and emerging weaknesses. In this case, libraries have a few key strengths we can identify as follows:

- They occupy valuable physical real estate that attracts substantial foot traffic on a daily basis
- They have educated, trained and experienced staff who are capable of delivering learning programs to diverse audiences
- They have a reputation for social inclusiveness

The decline of the Maker Space

These strengths speak to a bigger potential for public libraries, in my view, than many have been pondering. Much of the discussion around the future of public libraries has been within the context of what have come to be known as "maker spaces." The concept here has been that libraries can provide physical space for people who want to tinker with "do-it-yourself" projects, often using equipment few people can afford at home. Much of the "maker space" movement has centred on 3-D printers and some of the remarkable things that can be made with them. Given the cost of 3-D printers, it makes sense that libraries are experimenting with offering the public access to such technology.

A good example of maker spaces in the narrative of the future of public libraries is an article from the new-tech website Timeline[4], which describes such facilities as one of the important new services libraries can offer their communities. And while I won't quibble with the idea that maker spaces are a reasonable example of something libraries can do to attract and keep more members, I would also point out something that you don't need to be Alvin Toffler to realise. Maker spaces are likely to be a fad, and the cost of most of the things in them will, like all technological products, drop dramatically in coming years, so that anyone who wants one will likely own a 3-D printer. They certainly won't have the novelty factor they have now. For proof, think back a few years to other fads, such as the library as a video-gaming lounge. I can think of more than a few presentations I have attended in the first decade of this century during which librarians excitedly presented their findings that teenagers (and adults!) like video games, and having access to gaming technology was a popular addition to a library. Given the

ubiquity of cheap gaming platforms, plus the fact that gaming has become a highly compelling component of mobile device usage, it's no wonder libraries aren't investing in gaming lounges anymore.

An entrepreneurial approach to the library space

Let's think more strategically, like a proper entrepreneur would, and consider a problem libraries are uniquely positioned to solve. In many ways, the problem – and solution – are so obvious that they're easy to overlook. Libraries are about education, in the broadest sense of the term. They are about lifelong learning, again in the broadest sense of the term. And they exist, in our most expansive thinking, to help anyone travel their own, personal educational journey.

For an infant or a toddler, that journey is all about early literacy, and the library's role is critical, particularly because we know that people's life chances are profoundly impacted by the age at which they are exposed to books and story-telling. And because children in low-SES, immigrant and other disadvantaged communities are less likely to get sufficient exposure to pre- and early-literacy activities at home, the library plays a key role in providing this public good.

The learning journey, past Baby Rhyme Time

But it's not just newborns, toddlers and pre-schoolers who have their own personal learning journeys. Primary school kids, high schoolers, school-leavers, 20-something adults in the workforce, parents, part-time workers, Gen-Xers considering a second career, and Baby Boomers are all on their own learning pathways, and there are myriad ways for libraries to play a valuable, supporting role in those journeys. This may sound so all encompassing as to be beyond our ability to imagine how it could apply to a new model for public libraries. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Let's think back for a moment to the dilemma our university sector is now facing. The digitisation of the learning experience is pushing students into online learning settings, resulting in a growing proportion of students disappearing from campus and, in many instances, changing universities with little more than a click or two.

What role can libraries play in this scenario? To answer this question, we need look no further than Open Universities Australia, which over the course of the last few years has introduced its OUA Connect Library Program.[5] This program is a partnership between OUA and a number of public libraries whereby libraries provide space for OUA enrolled students to study, run information sessions about the research and study-related services available, and generally provide something like a mini campus experience for learners. This is an interesting partnership that has been initiated by OUA because of their growing awareness that their lack of physical infrastructure was an obstacle for students seeking the benefits of a physical study space staffed with trained staff.

Demand for local space increases, as the Uni campus disappears

I won't comment on the relative success of the OUA Connect Library Program, though there are a number of flaws in its implementation. What is noteworthy is the fact that it is one of the first instances of public libraries discovering – through a partnership with a large, private education provider (OUA is a highly profitable marketing business owned by several Australian universities) – the potential for reimaging their role as community campuses or learning hubs. The opportunity here goes well beyond the OUA partnership a handful of public libraries have struck. If we imagine the world five short years in the future, we can easily picture a scenario where university and TAFE campuses have been dramatically scaled back and simultaneously where millions of Australians are learning all ranges of things – both formally and informally – online. This includes studying for certificates, diplomas, bachelors and advanced degrees, as well as myriad skills that are essentially micro-courses in everything from DIY home repair to software design.

Will all these learners be able to access everything they need to succeed via the online learning environments their providers have populated with course content? Or will many of them be looking for something more, a local physical location where they can meet up with other learners, discuss their studies, seek assistance from trained research professionals, and even access professional learning support? Will they, in effect, be looking for a venue that is a hybrid student centre, café, learning support facility, and study group setting?

Lifelong learning, beyond schools and universities

Let's take a moment to look at this scenario from another perspective. What about the adult worker who has been working in a blue-collar job since leaving school and now, at the age of 35, is looking for something more? What about the young mother who left the workforce to look after children for five to seven years and is now keen to apply for work, perhaps in a field adjacent to her earlier expertise? What about the retrenched 55-year old (let's not forget that as our economy transitions from one of primary production to a knowledge-base that many jobs are going to disappear) searching for a new career? For many of these people, pursuing formal education in the form of a TAFE course or university degree is a daunting prospect. The local library provides a far gentler re-entry point or pathway into learning, because it is open to the public, free, anonymous for those who wish to remain so, and can provide informal learning services that assist even the shyest, most at-risk and disadvantaged residents.

Libraries as economic growth engines

There are further benefits to this vision for public libraries. To the extent we are all concerned that libraries maintain their relevance amongst councillors and council budgets, then positioning libraries as an engine of local economic growth and development – via the delivery of educational skills and services to local residents – is a powerful narrative. The key driver of employment, as we all know, is educational attainment. In order to foster a vibrant economy, communities need educated residents, and where educational attainment is insufficient to meet the needs of employers, communities need to make every effort to encourage skills development on the part of their residents. Libraries can and should play a central role in this process; they are best positioned to deliver educational experiences and have the physical resources and intellectual capacity to make good on such a promise.

This is far from a "pie-in-the-sky" vision. No less a figure than Catherine Livingstone, chair of the Business Council of Australia, in her address[6] to the Universities Australia delegates on 12 March 2015 described a dramatic rethink of the university sector, including an end to semester-based, degree-focused activities and toward a pathway of continuous learning of life and career skills. She was roundly praised, both by the delegates and in the media in subsequent days for challenging the status-quo and recognising that our traditional view of education has to change, if only to meet the needs of employers in the years ahead.

What does your Community Campus look like?

There's one final point we should remind ourselves of as we reimagine the public library's future. This vision of the community campus or learning hub has relevance to the broadest segment of the local population – essentially school-aged children to retirees. The demographics public library services have traditionally served exceptionally well are the youngest and oldest of us – those from zero to five years of age at one end of the spectrum and retirees at the other. The community campus vision of the local library targets the 80 per cent of the population between the ages of, say, 10 and 70, and delivers educational experiences and employment opening opportunities that can be life-changing. This has the potential to dramatically widen the user base of libraries, thereby strengthening their position in, and value to, our local communities.

I should conclude by stating that I write from personal experience. Much of my work over the last decade has been in delivering online learning services to public libraries, schools, TAFEs and universities. Over the course of the last year, our team has dramatically expanded the scope and capacity of our online learning service to move beyond the academic learning needs of high school students. We now assist educational institutions of all sorts to meet the academic and employment needs of their populations – whether they be tertiary students engaged in diploma or bachelors studies or adult learners seeking to improve their written English skills, relearn a maths concept, refine a resume, and grammar-check a cover letter to a job application. Demand for such services by adult learners of all backgrounds and abilities is proof that there is an enormous thirst for learning, and that libraries are perfectly positioned to become the bridge to a brighter future for all in Australia.

Key Learnings

1.   The digitisation of education – and the transformation it is bringing to the tertiary sector (Universities and TAFEs) – represents an opportunity for Australia's public libraries.

2.   Libraries that embrace the transformation into community campuses and learning hubs will expand their relevance to a broader population base and also prove their economic value to their councils.

3.   The "community campus" vision for public libraries has long-term potential and is unlikely to be subject to the same transitoriness of many technology-driven innovations of the past.

Notes and references

[1] https://m.timeline.com/stories/library-makerspace-books-tools-technology (viewed 17 March 2015)

2 http://www.open.edu.au/student-admin-and-support/study-resources/oua-connect-library-program/ (viewed 17 March 2015)

3 http://www.bca.com.au/newsroom/speech-by-catherine-livingstone-to-the-universities-australia-higher-education-conference (viewed 17 March 2015)

[1] http://www.nsla.org.au/sites/www.nsla.org.au/files/publications/NSLA.Aust_Pub_Lib_Stats_2012 13_0.pdf (226), page 31

[2] https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/australias-universities/key-facts-and-data#.VStO0I6Uf5c

[3] *To compare - National AFL Membership in 2014 was 816,000.* http://www.afl.com.au/news/2015-02-15/the-membership-race

[4] https://m.timeline.com/stories/library-makerspace-books-tools-technology (viewed 17 March 2015)

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[6] http://www.bca.com.au/newsroom/speech-by-catherine-livingstone-to-the-universities-australia-higher-education-conference viewed 17 March 2015.

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ENHANCING ONLINE LEARNING: PUBLIC LIBRARIES SUPPORTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUCCESS

ABSTRACT

CONTENT STREAM: PUBLIC LIBRARIES

INTRODUCTION

The development of an innovative program for online students in collaboration with public libraries began as a result of a chance conversation between a proactive librarian and a staff member from Open Universities Australia (OUA) about the needs of online students and the isolation that they often experience. From this an idea was born. Why not approach public libraries to see if they would be interested in offering library information sessions for OUA students in their local area? These sessions could encourage online students to meet together, get to know their local library, make use of its resources and gain that important face-to-face contact with professional library staff who understand the pressures of study.

METHODS

Between August 2012 and February 2013, a pilot program was run between OUA and four public libraries in regional areas of NSW. These libraries were promoted to OUA students (all studying online) as places where they could access high speed internet, modern computers, journal databases, inter-library loans, as well as encouragement and support from library staff. The feedback from students who attended was so positive that OUA decided to expand the program with the help of interested public libraries, creating the OUA Connect Library Program. With the support of the State Libraries of NSW and Victoria, and the Queensland Public Libraries Association (QPLA) the program has been promoted within these three states at national forums.

RESULTS

The pilot results demonstrated that the student cohort attending the libraries was highly satisfied, willing to recommend the program to others and wanting the program to continue. Primary reasons for attending were for academic purposes and for connection with other students, both for study support and social reasons. As a result of promotion and outreach to the library community, interest has grown considerably across five states, with more than 18 public libraries now part of the OUA Connect Library Program.

CONCLUSIONS

The OUA Connect Library Program brings together online students, public libraries and OUA in a collaborative relationship which enhances both the student experience and the role of public libraries within communities. OUA is keen to expand this program across as many public libraries as possible, to encourage the thousands of students who live and study remotely through OUA to make use of public library services and resources within their local

communities and, in doing so, to feel connected and supported with others who understand their needs.

RELEVANCE

This paper is relevant to the session theme of Public Libraries Supporting Communities. The OUA Connect Program provides an example of a collaborative venture which promotes the role of the public library in the community. Through the promotion of public libraries as important spaces and places for students, the library can support and assist students to access relevant knowledge, to have a more positive student experience and to participate more actively within their own communities whilst studying.

PAPER

Introduction

The development of an innovative new program for online students began as a result of a chance conversation between Dr Cathy Stone, Head of Student Success with Open Universities Australia (OUA), and a proactive librarian, Daniel Kielly, from the NSW Council Region of Shellharbour. The initial conversation centred around the fact that OUA students in the Shellharbour region, located on the south coast of NSW, would often attend local libraries to seek resources or simply to find a quiet place to study. As Daniel Kielly explained, if the library staff knew more about Open Universities Australia and the expectations placed on online students, they would be in a much better position to assist them.

From this an idea was born. Why not approach local libraries to see if they would be interested in learning more about OUA, but more importantly, in offering library information sessions for online students? These sessions could provide the opportunity for students, studying online and largely on their own, to come together, get to know their local library, make use of the resources on offer and gain that important face-to-face contact with others who understand their study needs.

The next step was to approach libraries and establish a pilot program. Daniel Kielly was willing to help coordinate a pilot program at Shellharbour to the south of Sydney, while the newly appointed Partnership Officer for Lifelong Learning at Wyong Council, Debbie Notara, was willing to coordinate the pilot across another two libraries in the Wyong Shire, to the north of Sydney.

Between August 2012 and February 2013, a pilot program was run between OUA and these four public libraries in regional areas of NSW. These libraries were promoted to OUA students (all studying online) as places where they could access high speed internet, modern computers, journal databases, inter-library loans, as well as encouragement and support from library staff.

The feedback from students who attended was so positive that OUA decided to expand the program with the help of interested public libraries, creating the OUA Connect Library Program. With the support of the State Libraries of NSW and Victoria, and the Queensland Public Libraries Association (QPLA) the program has been promoted within these three states at national forums. Since then, interest has grown considerably amongst the public library community, not only in NSW, Victoria and Queensland, but also in Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. By August 2014, OUA Connect had extended its partnerships to 25 council libraries across 4 states and territories in Australia (NSW, ACT, VIC and QLD) and is now exploring interest in the other states.

Need for the Program

Enhancing academic success is a goal that all of us involved in education strive to meet. Each of the authors of this paper has had close contact over many years with students in different settings, from many diverse backgrounds and of all ages. It is through this close contact that we have been constantly reminded of the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging and connection with a learning community. Hand in hand with this goes the need for appropriately targeted and effective support – both academic and personal, to

ensure that every student has the opportunity to reach their potential (Stone, 2000, 2004; Krause, 2005b; Tinto, 2009). How we can achieve this effectively in an online environment is a new challenge for many, as universities and other tertiary institutions move increasingly to online delivery.

Open Universities Australia

Open Universities Australia (OUA), which began as 'Open Learning' in Australia in 1993, is now the national leader in online higher education, with over 250,000 students having studied with it since it started operating. It is a company that is owned by seven Australian Universities, providing over 1800 units of study, and more than 180 qualifications from 13 Australian Universities.

OUA offers courses and units delivered online by its educational partners and affiliates. These include enabling and bridging courses, undergraduate degrees and postgraduate qualifications. Qualifications are awarded by the particular university which has provided the course of study, and these qualifications are identical to those awarded to on-campus students.

Online delivery removes many of the traditional barriers to higher education. Entry to nearly all units of study is open to all, requiring no pre-requisite qualifications. Students can choose to study a range of individual units, which may be based purely on interest, or can select those which will enable them to work towards a full degree program. Entry to a degree program can be achieved via the credit gained from units successfully completed. Some students also use OUA studies as a way to fast-track their qualifications. With four OUA study periods each year, students can gain extra credit by taking OUA units during the normal university vacation period.

OUA students can also apply for Fee Help, the Commonwealth scheme which allows deferred payment of fees in the same way as HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme), so that no money has to be paid up-front. Over 70% of OUA students use Fee Help to fund their studies. They can choose from a wide range of units and courses, including Arts & Humanities, Business, Education, Health, Information Technology, Law & Justice studies, Science & Engineering.

Who are OUA students?

OUA students come from all walks of life, including school leavers, mature workers, full-time parents and those who are unemployed. Approximately 60% of OUA students are female and the majority is aged over 21 – therefore 'mature-age' by definition. The majority of students come from NSW, Victoria and Queensland, but every other state and territory is represented as well. Nearly 78% of students live in major Australian cities with most speaking English as their first language. Over 80% nominate professional development as their primary motive for studying. Nearly 70% are employed full time or part time, while around one in ten are in full-time home duties and a similar number is seeking work. Just under half come from families where neither parent has a university qualification and around a quarter are from the lower five deciles for socio-economic status as determined by postcode. Similar to the statistics in the higher education sector in general, around 5% of students identify as having a disability.

The statistics above indicate that OUA students can generally be considered 'non-traditional'. Few come straight from school, the majority is mature-aged, a quarter come from the lower five SES deciles, around 40% are the first in their family to come to university, and they are all able to enter university studies through an open-entry environment. As such, OUA provides an important pathway into higher education for identified equity groups.

Importance of student engagement

So we know that OUA is an important entry point into higher education for many students from diverse backgrounds, and what we also know from other research is that the real challenge is effectively engaging and supporting such students so that they are more likely to stay and succeed. Definitions of student engagement vary slightly, but there is general agreement that it requires the investment and commitment of both the student and the institution, and that there are strategies which institutions can use to enhance engagement.

According to Krause and Coates (2008):

> student engagement develops from the dynamic interplay between student and institutional activities and conditions" (p.494).

Vicki Trowler, in her review of the literature on student engagement on behalf of the UK Higher Education Academy, summarises the character of student engagement in the following way:

> Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution. (Trowler, 2010, p.3).

Data from the AUSSE (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement; ACER, 2008a, 2009, 2010) informs us that amongst students in Australia and New Zealand, engagement with the learning community is closely linked with student satisfaction and success. This is consistent with the findings from the NSSE – the National Survey of Student Engagement that began in the US – as well as an international body of research, such as that by Kuh and colleagues who find that "Student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes" (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea, 2008. p.555).

Value of support mechanisms

Tinto's work in the area of student retention over many years also points to the impact of support on positive academic outcomes. Support is a condition that promotes student retention. Research points to several types of support that promote retention, in particular academic and social support. (Tinto, 2009). Forging positive connections with teaching staff and fellow students has also been demonstrated internationally to play a significant role in student satisfaction, persistence and academic success (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002; Quinn, 2005; Skahill, 2002/2003).

According to Skahill (2002/2003) "the most important criterion for staying in college is the student's social support network" (p. 39), while Rendon's (1998) work with mature-age and other non-traditional students in American colleges indicates the importance of "validation, when faculty, students, friends, parents and spouses made an effort to acknowledge these students and what they were trying to achieve" (p. 3). Kuh et al. (2008) find that there is a "compensatory effect" (p.555) of student engagement for students who are "academically unprepared or first in their families to go to college" (p.555), in that such students, when engaged, perform better academically than expected, in comparison to more advantaged students, as well as demonstrating persistence through improved retention.

Mature-age student experience

Research with Australian mature-age students (Stone and O'Shea, 2012) who are the first in their families to come to university (and who, as we have seen, form a significant cohort within OUA) demonstrates that establishing positive connections with others, such as lecturers, friends and fellow students, library staff, and others on campus, including those working in the cafeteria and the bookshops, played a major role in their determination to persist with their studies, despite the many pressures of time, money and family issues. Another important factor is the presence and use of free, well-resourced and easily accessible support services. "Easy and free access to [support] services is clearly of high importance in terms of supporting students to stay and succeed" (Stone & O'Shea, 2012, p.95).

Engaging through local libraries

While OUA provides a range of support services to students, including academic preparation courses, student coaching, counselling, tutorial support and financial assistance through scholarships and subsidies, the missing element in the support offered has been that of face-to-face interaction, particularly with other students.

We know that student interactions are highly important in student learning (ACER, 2008), particularly for non-traditional students. Initiatives connecting students with each other, such as student mentor programs, are recognised nationally and internationally as contributing significantly to student satisfaction and retention (Dearlove, Farrell, Handa, & Pastore, 2007; Erskine, 2000; Krause, 2005b; McInnes, James & Hartley, 2000; Stone, 2000). Through the assistance of local libraries, face-to-face student interactions in venues which are supportive of education became possible.

The student cohorts attending the libraries continue to be highly satisfied with the program, willing to recommend the program to others and wanting the program to continue. Reasons for attending are usually for academic purposes and for connection with other students, both for study support and social reasons. The following quotes are examples of student feedback:

> *Great having face-to-face contact and talking with other students about their experiences.*

> *I have found this helpful and encouraging especially the library staff and other students helps to keep you focussed, and aware there are other online students experiencing the same issues or have found ways to overcome these issues. Love the communication.*

This valuable program has provided an opportunity for OUA to work collaboratively with local libraries to provide a community space in which online students can interact and study with support from library staff.   It has the potential to improve academic success for online students, as well as enhancing student satisfaction, particularly amongst those from rural and remote regions of Australia.

Libraries interested in hosting sessions for online students can decide exactly what they are would like to offer – ranging from a one-off library information session, to weekly drop-in sessions for online students with a dedicated member of the library staff in attendance, to anything in between. OUA runs an information session with library staff, to equip them with knowledge about OUA and its students, the patterns of study expected and the support service available.

Many libraries already run sessions for their local communities which are of benefit to online students, including computer and essay writing classes. OUA is happy to promote any such sessions to its students, in the relevant postcode areas for each library. Promotion is primarily by email and via the OUA website, but there are also regular social media posts through OUA's social media channel. The program attracts great interest from students on Facebook. In fact, the very first OUA Connect status post was the most popular amongst OUA's Facebook community, with more than 124,000 individual views. Comments posted indicate that this is a very popular concept, with students commenting on which local libraries they would like to see participating in the OUA Connect Library Program.

CONCLUSION

Partnerships between educational services and local libraries are of benefit to all – to the libraries, to the educational institutions and, most of all, to the students. The OUA Connect Library Program brings together online students, public libraries and OUA in a collaborative relationship which enhances both the student experience and the role of public libraries within communities. OUA is keen to expand this program across as many public libraries as possible, to encourage the thousands of students who live and study remotely through OUA to make use of public library services and resources within their local communities and, in doing so, to feel connected and supported with others who understand their needs.

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'Working together': Public libraries supporting rural, regional, and remote low-socioeconomic student success in partnership with universities

Emma Power, Helen Partridge, Sue Owen, Kathryn Kelly & Sandra Jeffries

University students living in rural, regional, and remote (RRR) areas of Australia face unique challenges including geographical isolation, lack of access to face-to-face support, and technological barriers. Additionally, RRR students from low-socioeconomic (low-SES) backgrounds experience multiple forms of disadvantage compared to their on-campus peers, and require additional study, learning, and social support. Partnerships between universities and local public libraries can enhance RRR low-SES student success through increased access to face-to-face support, reliable technologies, and study facilities. This exploratory research, led by five regional universities, presents the first national-level empirical data exploring how Australian public libraries and universities can work together to facilitate success for RRR low-SES students. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with public librarians from RRR low-SES communities across Australia. Thematic analysis findings explore themes of librarians' perceptions of students as persons; the role of regional librarians in supporting RRR low-SES students; RRR low-SES students' access to learning support; and the critical elements of sustainable partnerships between RRR public libraries and universities. Key recommendations are provided to guide future partnerships between public libraries and universities, including building the foundations of partnerships; professional development to support partnerships; and recommendations for good partnership practices.

Keywords: Universities; public libraries; student success; rural regional and remote communities; partnership; study and learning support.

Introduction

University students from low-socioeconomic (low-SES) backgrounds living in rural, regional, and remote (RRR) Australian communities experience multiple disadvantages compared to their on-campus peers, impacting RRR low-SES student success. In higher education, 'student success' is traditionally defined as student engagement, academic achievements, retention rates, and completion rates (Tinto, 1993; York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). These measures contribute to a deficit narrative around student success, and do not consider student experiences and behaviours (Picton, Kahu, & Nelson, 2018; Wood & Breyer, 2017).

Recently, holistic conceptualisations of student success have emerged. They include the following factors: feelings of belonging with peers, courses, and university (Naylor, 2017; Picton et al., 2018); a sense of positive psychological wellbeing and community (Schreiner, 2010); and 'academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post college performance' (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006, p. 7). This study merges the traditional and the holistic definitions into a nuanced understanding of RRR low-SES student success.

Rural, Regional, and Remote Low-Socioeconomic Student Support

In 2008, the Bradley 'Review of Australian Higher Education' called for increased higher education access and participation from students with low-SES backgrounds and those living in RRR communities, as unequal access had contributed to underrepresented participation for these groups (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Following the 'Bradley Review' in 2008 little has changed in the participation rates of RRR and low-SES students (DEEWR (2008) as cited in Bradley et al., 2008; Department of Education and Training, 2017b).

Furthermore, both RRR and low-SES students exhibit low completion rates, and require additional support in order to meet the Bradley Review targets for retention and completion (Bradley et al., 2008; Department of Education and Training, 2017a).

Inequality also exists in the support provided to students in RRR areas. These students report lower levels of support compared to their on-campus peers, leading to higher levels of overall dissatisfaction and departure intentions (Radloff & Coates, 2010). Furthermore, RRR students studying online feel like 'second-class citizens' (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015, p. 55) compared to their on-campus peers. They lack access to reliable internet and technology; face-to-face support; and networking and connections with their peers and lecturers (Bailey, Ifenthaler, Gosper, Kretzschmar, & Ware, 2015; Lowrie & Jorgensen, 2012; Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011; Waha & Davis, 2014). These factors can lead to feelings of isolation and poor learning experiences, contributing to lower retention rates for RRR students (Parkes, Gregory, Fletcher, Adlington, & Gromik, 2015).

RRR low-SES students experience a heightened level of the detrimental effects of poverty on their participation and retention, requiring sustainable outreach and support initiatives from universities (Bradley et al., 2008). Providing comprehensive support for RRR low-SES students will increase student academic achievement while reducing rates of departure intentions and dissatisfaction (Radloff & Coates, 2010). One approach to achieve this is through 'institutional cross-collaboration and partnerships, including sharing the use of facilities and resources' with local community organisations (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 111).

Communities will also benefit from university partnerships with local organisations. Rural residents perceive increasing a university's presence in their community is highly important. Perceived benefits include increased retention of young people in RRR communities due to increased equity of access to higher education, leading to greater family and community support networks for those who choose to stay and study locally

(Drummond, Halsey, & van Breda, 2011). Family support is also an essential factor in regional low-SES student success (Devlin & McKay, 2017).

Regional Public Libraries

Public libraries in RRR low-SES Australian communities are well-positioned to provide local university students with essential face-to-face study support, facilities, and technologies. Many RRR communities around Australia have a public library, with over 1400 public library branches spread Australia-wide (NSLA, 2017). The mission of public libraries is to provide universal access to support, services, and resources for all groups and individuals in their community. This also includes lifelong learning and study enabling facilities, aligning with the support needs of RRR low-SES students (Koontz & Gubbin, 2010). Public libraries are safe spaces trusted by community members to receive information support and resources in response to their needs (Oliphant, 2014).

Public libraries and universities working in partnership could encourage students to use their local library, which has a positive correlation with student achievement (Brown & Malenfant, 2016). Additionally, an increase in student retention rates can be achieved through the use of libraries and the support of librarians, assisting students to gain lifelong learning skills alongside digital and information literacies (Becker, 2006; Haddow & Joseph, 2010; Hagel, Horn, Owen, & Currie, 2012; Pendell, Withers, Castek, & Reder, 2013).

Public Libraries and Universities Working Together to Support Students

Universities working together in partnership with public libraries provide opportunities for delivering multifaceted support to low-SES university students in RRR communities across Australia. In an international context, Behr and LaDell-Thomas's (2014) study found distance education students ranked the closeness of a public library location as an important factor in

their use of the library for study and learning needs. These students were self-directed learners, with less than half seeking research support from public library staff, and 42% utilising their local public library alongside their university's online library. They concluded that partnerships between public libraries and universities could improve distance education students' study and learning experiences (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014). Potential partnerships identified include increased promotion of academic and public libraries' services, peer networking opportunities, academic writing and research skill sessions, and exam supervision (Dority (2000) as cited in Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014).

In the Australian literature, only two studies provide empirical evidence exploring how Australian public libraries in partnership with universities support current RRR students in their community. The first explored Open Universities Australia's partnership with four regional community public libraries in New South Wales. Library information sessions hosted by public libraries raised local student awareness of their study support and facilities such as internet and computer access, journal databases, inter-library loan services, and face-to-face support from library staff (Hill & McGowan, 2014a). Students reported attending sessions to seek study support and connection with peers in their community, with 85% (N=20) reporting increased confidence studying online post-sessions (Hill & McGowan, 2014b). The partnership benefited both the participating public libraries and students, as it allowed students to 'make use of public library services and resources within their local communities and, in doing so, to feel connected and supported with others who understand their needs' (Hill & McGowan, 2014a, p. 1).

The second study by Howlett, Partridge, and Belov (2017) was the first in Australia to explore how regional public libraries in Queensland currently support university students in their communities. Their qualitative analysis led to multiple findings. Firstly, public librarians do not have full knowledge of students' specific learning support needs, and the

support they can or could provide students. This is due to a lack of information sharing and communication with universities, and limited evidence gathering by libraries, leading to unmet student learning support expectations. Howlett et al. (2017) also identified a tension between participants saying that academic libraries are responsible for students' study and learning needs and support, but then describing public libraries as providers of access and support for all learning in their community. They also outlined the mission of public libraries to balance the needs of different user groups across the community, and to supply more general materials rather than resources for small and specific groups. Public librarians perceived libraries as a 'host' for university students to access study and learning support. Due to limited academic resources, 'hosting' was seen as student use of library facilities including study spaces and technology. Librarians also provided a first point of contact and assistance in finding and referring students towards materials, services, and support (Howlett et al., 2017).

Howlett et al. (2017) highlighted that further research is needed to fill gaps in the empirical literature in this area. This includes involving multiple institutions to examine implementing partnerships between public libraries and universities to support students in RRR communities nation-wide, to expand the geographic scope and applicability of findings. Additionally, all three studies did not explicitly explore study and learning support provided by public libraries and universities for both RRR located and low-SES students (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014; Hill & McGowan, 2014b; Howlett et al., 2017).

To address this gap in the literature, the 'Working Together' project conducted exploratory research to investigate how public libraries and universities across Australia can work together to support RRR low-SES student success. The Howlett et al. (2017) findings and recommendations shaped the initial thinking leading to the 'Working Together' project. Five regional Australian universities, all with significant RRR low-SES student enrolments,

partnered together to lead the project. It sought perspectives from 19 public librarians and 42 university students living in 17 RRR low-SES communities, alongside 30 university staff working to support students across the five partnering institutions.

This paper explores the 'Working Together' project's findings derived from qualitative analysis of 19 semi-structured interviews with public librarians in RRR low-SES communities with university student enrolments. It presents the first national-level empirical data on how public libraries support RRR low-SES students, and how public libraries working together with universities provides opportunities to enhance RRR low-SES student success.

The Research Project

Research Aim

This research project sought to investigate the following research question: 'how can Australian universities and public libraries work together to provide highly accessible, relevant, and sustainable learning support to meet the needs of low socio-economic higher education students living in regional and remote communities?' (Working Together, 2018). Specifically, it aimed to explore through an interpretivist lens how RRR low-SES university students' study and learning needs are currently supported by public libraries, including any issues or challenges faced, and how universities can work together with public libraries in partnership to support students further. Importantly, the study was not restricted to partnerships between academic libraries and public libraries only, as the entire suite of university student support in partnership with public libraries is needed to provide holistic support to RRR low-SES students.

Conceptualizing Student Success

For this research project, student success was defined as the combination of both the traditional and holistic understandings of student success:

- Students experiencing positive psychological wellbeing, community (Schreiner, 2010), and belonging within their peers, courses, and university (Naylor, 2017; Picton et al., 2018);
- Students engaging in satisfying and purposeful educational activities, leading to skill and knowledge acquisition producing academic achievement (Kuh et al., 2006);
- Engagement, achievement, and belonging combining to allow students to persist towards attaining their desired educational outcomes, leading to increased retention and completion rates (Tinto, 1993; York et al., 2015).

Selecting the Regional and Remote Communities

Five regional universities with significant RRR low-SES student enrolments partnered together for this study. Each created a shortlist of eight or more RRR communities across Australia using student enrolment data from their institution. Using the following set of selection criteria, these 40+ communities were narrowed down to four per university, 20 in total. Communities were selected to represent a diverse set of remoteness, socio-economic disadvantage, and contextual attributes:

- Communities were firstly selected to represent a range of remoteness levels using the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) including inner regional, outer regional, remote, and very remote communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

- Communities were shortlisted if their Socio Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) score placed their postcode in the lowest 10% to 50% of relative socio-economic advantage, in comparison to all postcodes across Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

- Other contextual factors applied as selection criteria were: (a) community proximity to the nearest public library is under one hour's drive; (b) population is between 200 and 30,000 people; and (c) inclusion of a range of regional areas across the Australian states and territories.

Public library staff from the 20 selected communities were invited to participate. Due to slow participation uptake an additional nine communities were added to the recruitment list and subsequently invited to participate to address the shortfall in participation. These communities were sourced from the rejected shortlisted communities, using a 'best fit' approach with the selection criteria.

Data Collection

From these 29 locations, staff members at each community's local public library were invited to participate. Contact details were retrieved via the associated state libraries and local library websites. Data was collected through recorded Skype and telephone semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview format used allowed deeper investigation into the experiences of library staff. The interview protocol was designed and utilised to elicit the public library participants' experiences and perceptions of: (a) university student study and learning needs; (b) supporting students' needs, including resources and services provided; (c) any issues or challenges faced; and (d) how public libraries can work together with universities to support local RRR low-SES students.

Participants

When data collection was finalised, a total of 19 participants from 17 RRR low-SES communities were interviewed. 18 participants were female, and one was male. Participants were most often employed at the level of library manager (or equivalent), and reported having insight into strategic planning, resourcing, operations, budgets, partnerships, and front-facing customer service experience.

The 17 communities where the 19 participants were employed as a library staff member were finalised as the community sites for recruitment of university students for the project. The participating communities were most commonly located in inner and outer regional ASGS areas; with only one remote community and one very remote community (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Most communities were located in New South Wales and Queensland. Other states represented include Western Australia, Tasmania, and Victoria. The majority of these communities were situated in areas of the lowest 10-20% socio-economic advantage according to the SEIFA score of their postcode, and with populations of under 10,000 residents as of 2017 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Data Analysis

The 19 interviews yielded approximately 15.5 hours of recorded audio, which was transcribed into 367 pages of text. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis methodology was used to guide data analysis. Thematic data analysis organises and codes transcription data into the rich detail of the specific phenomenon present, including experiences, emotions, and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis identified four themes of participant experience, further elaborated in the findings section. All participant quotes are de-identified, using only participant numbers (e.g. P1 for Participant 1).

Findings

The thematic analysis identified four themes of participant experience:

- *Student as person:* detailing their understanding of the life experiences and responsibilities local students are managing alongside their studies.
- *Role:* describing their mission within the community, and their understanding of how their role supports current and future local students.
- *Access:* encompassing local RRR low-SES students' access to support, facilities, and study resources through their public library, including current needs and gaps.
- *Partnerships:* exploring key practices for implementing successful partnerships between public libraries and universities.

These themes all build upon each other. For example, the *student as person* theme highlights a lack of participants' knowledge of students' study and learning support needs through empirical data and training. This is related to participants' *role* theme, as librarians don't see themselves as experts in the provision of face-to-face student support due to their limited knowledge of students' needs, and instead see their role as referral-based, directing students towards information and services. From the interaction of the two previous themes, the *access* theme identifies participants' perception that library facilities such as study spaces and technology are the main form of local students' access to support, rather than through face-to-face support. The *partnerships* theme explores how public libraries and universities working together can fill gaps in public librarians' understanding of student needs, and the face-to-face support they could further provide to local students. The themes will now be discussed in full.

Student as Person

Participants held perceptions surrounding the lived experiences of students studying within their community. They focus on students as a whole person, including their understanding of students' backgrounds, contexts, experiences, and support needs.

Librarians observed that university students in their community come from a range of diverse backgrounds, with the majority studying externally online. The most common group observed were described as 'mature-aged people that also have jobs that try and fit in… their studies in with their work and family' (P5). Participants observed local students are 'people who are obviously studying from here because they want to stay in town and they want to contribute to the community by bettering themselves' (P16). Students were perceived by librarians as being high in self-efficacy, especially in organising their studies and resources: 'because we're so isolated, most of them [students] are pretty good … pretty organised. You have to be when you live so far away from anywhere' (P14).

Librarians have empathy for students studying online in their community, as 'a lot of us have done Distance Ed study and we understand' (P3). Due to this, they build relationships with the students in their community as a way of informal study support. Librarians encourage students and 'keep them motivated, you know, check in on them' (P3), which they see as beneficial for students 'socially and probably for their mental health after all the study, they probably like that chat' (P16). The benefit of this ongoing support over months and years is 'we see where their journey starts and we often, through relationships, know where they want to go to' (P7). Participants have observed this informal method of study support can improve retention for students studying online:

>…they have said to us, that's been the difference between giving up and continuing in
>their studies, because there's a physical presence, there's a person they can talk to even if

it's only five minutes… even if we don't explicitly help them, just having someone to say "I'm doing this assignment", you know, it makes a difference to them. (P7)

Participants also perceived the transition towards studying at university as intimidating for some individuals in their community. Their perception related to the confidence of these potential students in particular, 'it's that fear of going and appearing stupid that puts a lot of people off' (P11). They also empathised with people on a pathway to university who may be the first in their family to do so, 'if you're coming from a family where you are the first one to embark on university, I think everything that surrounds that must be so intimidating' (P11). In order to support these community members, librarians see this as an opportunity to position the library as a welcoming space:

…using a public library is a good practice run for a university library as well, which can be quite different to a public library. But if you go from nothing to university library, that's a massive step… we're kind of like that grassroots entry-level learning, and confidence-building. (P7)

Despite these insights into local university students' contexts and experiences, most participants do not collect data on the demographics and patronage of students to their library, as they 'haven't needed to in the past' (P2). This is partly due to the difficulty many participants expressed in being able to identify patrons as university students 'unless they come up and talk to staff about it and ask questions' (P4). While some librarians 'usually know [which patrons are university students] because it's a smallish town' (P2), a lack of data collection means participants were not able to accurately estimate the number of university students in their community or using their library. Due to this, formalised study and learning support for university students in particular were not provided by participants' libraries, as empirical data demonstrating need is commonly required by funding bodies to be successful in funding and implementing support and resources. Additionally, due to the lack

of empirical data regional libraries have on the students in their communities, some participants expressed uncertainty regarding their understanding of what support these students need: 'the only challenge that we face is trying to understand exactly what it is that they need' (P13). They highlighted student feedback as critical, as 'we need them to be telling us what we can do to support them' (P6).

Role

Participants identified their role within the community aligns with their mission to provide resources, facilities, and support to 'try and spread our resources over the whole community' (P2). This mission is also necessary due to the impact of limited funding upon public libraries. Participants expressed anxiety around the limited funding they receive, often from a combination of sources including their state library, local council, and state and federal government.

While librarians are 'multi-skilled, multi-focused' (P6) professionals, they commonly didn't see themselves as experts or adequately trained in supporting university students' specific academic study and learning needs, saying 'our staff has expertise, but that's in the field of library' (P6). Specific academic study and learning support was not reportedly offered by most library staff, as 'the skills to be able to help them [students] with assignments, with essays… the tutor education skills – that's not a traditional library skill set' (P3).

Instead, librarians saw their role in supporting students as providing accurate face-to-face information referrals to 'point people in the right direction' (P2). However, most librarians reported limited or no awareness of the range of study and learning support services universities offer their online students, thus limiting their ability to refer students towards accessing university support services. The majority of their knowledge of these

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services was drawn from participants' own university study experiences. Librarians identified universities could provide more information, beyond basic informational posters, to allow libraries to add this into 'training and in our knowledge-base system for our staff' (P16).

Compared to the support offered to rural students, librarians appeared more confident in their support offered to community members on a pathway towards enrolling in university:

> …if we had a student that we knew was looking into becoming a university student, particularly as a distance student, then we would see it as a part of our responsibility to help them find and understand all the information around what that entails, what that's going to mean for them and how to navigate their way through. (P7)

Librarians, through their support of life-long learning, assist in building community members' learning identity and teach foundational skills critical for learning, such as 'time management, negotiating skills, applying knowledge' (P7). As discussed earlier, participants perceive many community members find universities intimidating, so they position public libraries as 'a place that is accepting and non-judgemental and that is available for them' (P7) to build confidence and practise these skills.

Librarians also provide information through referrals to community members looking for more information on pathways to university study. This includes university and study information and support websites including where individuals can enrol online, and 'making them aware of what is available through the university system and what they can do to extend themselves' (P5).

Access

Public librarians and libraries provide RRR low-SES students with access to limited face-to-face study and learning support, and to critical technology and study facilities. Access was consistently discussed by participants in relation to their library's mission of providing

whole-of-community support, including the potential benefits for the wider community through equal access to the same support. Additionally, participants were concerned with the number of local university students needed to make expansion of support and resources worthwhile for libraries to invest in, due to limited library budgets and funding. Significant numbers of university students studying locally was perceived by librarians as a strong rationale for expansion of funding, support, and services.

The main face-to-face learning support students currently request from librarians is 'technology help rather than actual reference questions' (P8), often from students who are mature-aged and 'going back to study, not sure how to use the computer' (P9). This computer literacy support is provided through one-on-one ad-hoc support, or through formalised computer literacy programs run regularly at the library for any community member to attend.

Exam supervision was another source of face-to-face student support, usually provided for free by many libraries, that librarians felt often goes unrecognised by universities. This was a source of frustration for librarians as supervising exams:

> …has a cost to it, because that means often the staff are limited to what kinds of tasks they can carry out while they're there, because if they're not allowed to leave the student unmonitored. (P6)

The service is continued in some libraries however, as they recognise the benefits to students who don't have to travel to campus to undertake exams.

The predominant way librarians perceived they currently support university students is through providing access to two essential study facilities: technology and study space. Participants provided students access to technology, including wireless internet, power points, computers, printers, and scanners. Participants observed most students would bring their own laptops to connect to the library Wi-Fi and sit at a 'desk that you can plug in power and use your own device at the library' (P13). As internet access is costly, unreliable, or

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unavailable in many RRR low-SES areas of Australia, free Wi-Fi internet access is seen as 'a really vital service for this community because it's a fairly low socio-economic area' (P12). Library public access computers were also cited as a source of support for some students who don't have access to a computer at home. Other digital resources commonly used by students were the library's paid printers and scanners to print syllabus, resources, and assignments. Only a minority of libraries have video-conferencing capabilities, which was seen by participants as a key area to improve access for students.

Students also access their library's quiet study spaces, including meeting rooms, desks and study carrels with power points. However, librarians in small libraries found it challenging to provide this space, as 'there's not a lot of room, we're not a huge library' (P14). Additionally, librarians observed noise from other patrons utilising the library can be a source of disruption for students attempting to study:

> …libraries aren't going to be quiet, they're not the quiet space that they used to be, and we're always trying to meet the needs of everybody in the public libraries. And without being able to provide that traditional quiet space for students … they find it very difficult to do what they need to do. They compete in priorities. (P13)

A common source of frustration for library staff is students' common misconception that they can expect to access their textbooks from their local public library. All public librarians were adamant that their libraries don't have the budget to buy textbooks, relating to their mission to support the majority of community members, as they 'can buy three or four adult fictions, for the cost of the cheapest textbook' (P16). Librarians found accessing students' textbooks through inter-library loans was often unsuccessful. Even if a textbook is available for inter-library loan, high loan fees left students:

> …feeling penalised if they have to access it somewhere else. And especially in rural and remote areas, if you do not have transport and you're relying on dodgy internet

connections and you've got a public library where they say to you, "I'm sorry, this book is going to cost you $18 to get in". (P11)

This was a barrier for local students needing access to a textbook via inter-library loan, as the 'cost is a big… a real barrier' (P14) and 'prohibitive for a student' (P11).

While most librarians did not see their physical library collection as being particularly helpful for students' study and learning, many thought their access to subscribed journals and databases was a useful source of support. However libraries' ability to subscribe to scholarly journals is currently on the decline due to their limited budgets. Despite this, librarians identified:

> …our best skill would be actually help them [students] search databases, 'cause clearly the university provides them with more in-depth databases than we can as a public library. But we have got the skills to assist them to use them more efficiently. (P8)

Partnerships

Participants had a range of experiences and recommendations regarding how partnerships are implemented due to current and past partnership experiences and knowledge of public library operations. Foundational elements of partnership included openness, initiation, communication, implementation, sustainability, roles, and goals.

Most librarians indicated they are open to working together and partnering with universities to support students and expected the majority of other RRR public libraries would also be open to partnership opportunities. Before partnerships can be implemented, communication and relationships between public libraries and universities were identified by participants as needing improvement. Participants feel current dialogue with universities is low or non-existent due to disconnection and 'silos'. They recognised establishing relationships with universities and individuals can assist in opening dialogue to discuss possibilities of working together to support the RRR low-SES students in their communities.

This would help librarians in their ability to provide referral support for students through 'someone that we can contact, and then they can always point us in the right direction' (P17).

Librarians saw the next step as opening a dialogue between institutions regarding the needs of students in the area. Librarians preferred that universities take the lead role when initiating partnerships by 'providing the library with information on what they can do to assist university students' (P18). Due to a lack of data on students in their community, librarians requested information on 'how many university students are in our area studying either online or by distance' (P16). Data on student numbers and needs would allow libraries to commit or secure more funding and resources to supporting students if there are significant numbers in the community. Furthermore, due to the funding models of some public libraries their local councils, library corporations, and state library organisations could also play a role in approving partnerships. Participants also saw a role for state libraries to raise awareness of partnerships and encourage public libraries to work together with universities to support RRR low-SES students.

Partnerships must also be built on a foundation of mutual benefit, understanding, respect, and equality between public libraries and universities in order to be successful. It is important to public librarians 'to be seen as equal partners' (P7) throughout the process. Equal partnership is crucial for success, because:

> …if we're all about developing and supporting the client to reach their learning goals, it has to be an equal partnership, it can't be the university coming in and telling us what we have to do to support them – which is sometimes how it feels – with no acknowledgement, or very little acknowledgement, that we have a different mission. (P7)

Librarians stressed it was crucial that universities understand their mission and role within the community, in order to have an open dialogue for the possibilities of working together:

It's about showing that champion for libraries within the university who has an understanding of the ethos of public libraries, to make those connections. And to see the opportunities, when conversations take place, to say, "Well, have you thought about talking to the public library about doing that?" (P6)

Mutually beneficial partnerships are also crucial for the longevity of these projects, as 'there has to be mutual benefit because if it's one sided, it's generally not very sustainable' (P6). Working together with universities to support students is seen as mutually beneficial for public libraries, as:

…there's benefits for us because if there's 20 extra students join the library as a result of this… that's time well spent. And if they're accessing our resources, then that's increasing our usage, which all supports why library services exist. (P6)

Equality of access and support for all community members is critical for public librarians, who also stipulated that all university students in their community should be supported in partnerships, not only the partnering university's students.

Additionally, mutual respect must be established to ensure a successful partnership experience: 'you've got to meet on a level playing field with a bit of mutual respect… you work in a different field and you might be deficient in these resources, but you're actually very capable and you know what you're doing' (P11).

Public librarians discussed the importance of communication with universities regarding the needs of students, and how this relates to realistic goals of partnership. Openness and clarity surrounding partnership goals is also vital, with participants calling for a:

…clear memorandum of understanding of what each service provider are going to supply and how it's going to work; understanding of the implications on space and service delivery expectations from staff; and a clear budget as well. (P1)

This may allay concerns librarians expressed surrounding universities shifting their responsibilities and costs onto public libraries:

> The thing I am a bit wary about is cost shifting, in terms of what am I expected to pick up that the university already does, but that may be passed on to the library… And also if there's a big contingency of students, how will we be supported in technology or hardware or resources to support that? (P1)

While partnerships are being implemented, frank communication between all parties should continue, with stakeholders needing to 'regularly review that [partnership]. You know, things change all the time, you can't just expect something to be working for the next two or three years. It has to be reviewed and it has to be done collaboratively' (P7).

Sustainability of partnerships was a concern of many librarians, who highlighted the importance of gaining sustainable funding; creating realistic time commitments and milestones; and ensuring the longevity of the partnership and its funding. Participants hold this view because 'you're not going to see any change until you've worked at something for 10 to 15 years' (P11). A protective factor for public libraries and universities is their established history in the Australian context:

> …you're actually looking at two institutions that have actually got longevity and that works in its favour. It is not an agency that was constructed five years ago and has got maybe a 10-year shelf life. You've got two institutions that have form. I think that is a big advantage. (P11)

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings from the four themes will now be explored and related back to existing literature to provide recommendations for future best practice in partnerships. The following recommendations address the need to build partnership foundations, essential professional development for public library and university staff, best practice for partnership

implementation, and avenues for future research.

Current Student Support

It is important to acknowledge the support public libraries in RRR communities currently provide their local students. The most significant source of support is providing students with internet access. This has been identified in the literature as a significant equity issue for both low-SES students and those living in RRR communities (Devlin & McKay, 2017; Nelson et al., 2017). Devlin and McKay (2017) found internet access provided through public libraries is a critical factor in student success, enabling them to access and download study materials, and participate in lectures, assessment, and online discussion forums.

Additionally, public libraries enable students' access to study space and technology such as public access computers, printers, and scanners. Students can engage in online learning activities and assessment at their local public library if they do not have adequate access to these technologies or space at home. These findings are supported by Howlett et al. who also found public libraries were a 'host' to facilities and technology supporting students' access to study and learning materials and supports (2017). This is significant as Devlin and McKay (2017) also identified reliable technology as another factor in regional and low-SES student success.

Other face-to-face support provided by public libraries includes empathic conversation and interest in students' learning journey, with librarians perceiving their face-to-face support assisted in local student retention. Behr & LaDell-Thomas identified these face-to-face interactions with librarians are significant for RRR students who might otherwise miss out on this type of support (2014), with empathic support identified another factor in regional and low-SES student success (Devlin & McKay, 2017).

Another face-to-face support provided by public libraries is exam supervision, which allows students to participate in exam assessment from their local community (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014; Howlett et al., 2017). This service is perceived to be unrecognised by universities, yet it supports many RRR low-SES students who may not have the financial resources to travel to university campuses to sit exams. While providing access to journal articles and public library research assistance support is not widely practiced among participating libraries, literature supports the findings that most students are self-directed in their use of public libraries, with less of a need for face-to-face study support in this area (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014).

Furthermore, public librarians position their local public library as a safe accessible space for community members on the pathway to university and throughout their higher education journey. Their support in building learning identity, time management skills, and computer literacies enacts a key recommendation from Halsey's Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education to 'support RRR students to make successful transitions from school to university' (2018, p. 5).

Building the Foundations of Partnership

Foundational changes are needed to improve the environment for partnership and RRR low-SES student support and success.

By promoting the services, facilities, resources, and support that RRR low-SES students can access at their local public libraries, universities can increase student awareness and usage of their local public library (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014). This is beneficial for student success, as literature suggests increased student library usage is related to higher academic achievement and retention (Brown & Malenfant, 2016; Haddow & Joseph, 2010).

Furthermore, universities can support both the experience of RRR low-SES students and the public libraries supporting them through opening access to study resources through increased institutional adoption of Open Textbooks and Open Educational Resources. This would ensure low-SES students in RRR communities can download their textbooks or resources anywhere they have internet access, such as their local library. This could remove the significant financial burden on RRR low-SES students from buying multiple textbooks or paying multiple inter-library loan fees (Bossu, Bull, & Brown, 2012). Additionally, universities could support and promote university academic libraries' services that increase student access to study resources. These services include access to online collection e-texts, return postage of physical collection books, scanning and sending students' excerpts of books, online skills development modules, and online assistance and inquiry services.

To lay the foundations for partnerships, universities should identify RRR communities with local enrolled students with study needs and a public library located in their vicinity. Data on local student study support needs is crucial information for public libraries to receive before partnerships can begin. This will ensure libraries are delivering according to needs of the students in the community, as they currently have little data to provide them with insight into student needs. Public libraries' lack of student needs data was also identified in the Howlett et al. study, which also recommended universities should increase communication and information sharing of student study support needs with public libraries, including: the number of students in their community, the technology needed by students, and the existing support services provided to students by their universities (2017).

Professional Development to Support Partnership

Training for both university staff and RRR public library staff is recommended to increase understanding of the missions and support abilities of both institutions, and for public library

staff to provide appropriate support and referral to university support services and information. Professional development is required to increase university staff understanding of the mission of public libraries and the resources, facilities, and support they can (and currently) provide students. As found by both this study and Howlett et al. (2017), public libraries cannot commit unlimited resources to student support, as their mission is to provide a balanced provision of services to support needs across the community.

Professional learning for public library staff could increase their understanding of RRR low-SES students and their local study and learning needs, and the ways public libraries can support these needs (Devlin & McKay, 2017; Howlett et al., 2017). This professional learning can provide a solid foundation towards the development of ongoing partnerships.

Further training can expand the support RRR public librarians already provide to local students through advice and referrals to information and support, also identified in the Howlett et al. study (2017). Firstly, professional development could increase staff understanding of what online and distance university education currently involves, and the range of study and learning support services available to students from their university, as also recommended by Howlett et al. (2017). Secondly, professional development and resources are needed to increase public library staff understanding of the many pathways for community members to apply to study at universities online. This may assist in supporting community members who find university systems and pathways intimidating, as reported by participants.

Recommendations for Partnership Practice

This study addresses the gap in literature identified by Howlett et al. (2017), through providing concrete findings and recommendations for public libraries and universities to work together in partnership to support RRR low-SES students. Recommendations for

partnership encompass partnership communication, roles, goals, access, and sustainability.

Communication is important throughout the partnership process. Public libraries are calling for formal channels of communication and relationships to be established with universities, as also found in Howlett et al. (2017). To make partnerships a sustainable proposition in the long term, engagement and action from these recommendations can develop through communication between key stakeholders from universities, public libraries, professional organisations, and state governments. This would ensure communication and relationships are maintained over the long term at senior levels across Australian public libraries and universities.

Additionally, in the initial stages of partnership universities need to provide public libraries with data on student numbers in their community and information on student learning needs and support, as also found by Howlett et al. (2017). Communication should also include the mission statements of both institutions, with public libraries stipulating the importance of support for all university students living in their community rather than only for partnering institutions' students, aligning with their mission as discussed by Koontz and Gubbin (2010).

Another important step towards partnership is clearly outlining the roles of each stakeholder and the shared goals of working together. Each stakeholder should be treated as an equal partner, with mutual respect and understanding of each other's missions. Other stakeholders, including local councils, funding bodies, and community organisations, should also be considered and included in communication. Clear boundaries in the roles of both university and public libraries are important, as cost and responsibility shifting is a concern of public library staff.

Goals of the partnership in the short and long term need to be established and regularly revisited to measure progress throughout the partnership process. Goals should be

mutually beneficial to the missions of public libraries and universities, with the shared focus on the provision of support to RRR low-SES students. It is essential to ensure the responsibilities of each stakeholder in pursuit of goals are achievable and sustainable in the long-term. This can be enacted through public libraries and universities working together to develop strategies to ensure sustainable access and resource sharing, through changing business models to redirect silos of support practices and to streamline RRR low-SES students' access to support. Sustainable partnerships can be achieved with realistic goals and regular open communication between stakeholders. Additionally, partnerships should ensure adequate funding for the long term (at least five to ten years) is secured to have real impact for low-SES students in RRR communities.

National and state-level professional bodies representing multiple institutions and libraries are best positioned to identify partnership opportunities from these recommendations to support the needs of RRR low-SES students. These include Universities Australia, Regional Universities Network, Australian Library and Information Association, and the Council of Australian University Librarians, National Libraries Australia, and state library organisations such as Public Libraries Victoria.

Future Research

Several avenues for future research are recommended. As identified by Howlett et al. (2017), research should explore RRR low-SES students' current access to support at their local public library for their study, learning, and wellbeing needs. This could build upon the existing work of Devlin and McKay's (2017) eight key factors relating to regional and low-SES student success. Research can also identify opportunities for additional support to be provided in response to RRR low-SES students' needs, through partnerships between public libraries and universities.

Additionally, a comprehensive investigation of RRR low-SES students' use of their local public library for study and learning support, services, and facilities is needed, similar to the American study conducted by Behr and LaDell-Thomas (2014). Gaps between student needs and usage of library support and services would indicate ideal areas for partnership.

Research to map the impacts and outcomes of existing partnerships Australia-wide between public libraries and universities to support RRR low-SES students is also needed, with limited case studies existing thus far (Hill & McGowan, 2014a; Mountford, 2011).

Further research into these areas can influence the professional learning of both public library and university staff on the evidence-based practices needed to strategically guide sustainable partnerships. It can also be used to enhance existing partnership practices and add to the literature on public libraries and universities working together.

Conclusion

Students from low-SES backgrounds living in RRR communities experience multiple inequalities leading to lower student success when compared to their on-campus peers. Partnerships between public libraries and universities can help improve RRR low-SES student success through providing access to face-to-face learning support, resources, and reliable technology. This study involved five institutions exploring how Australian public libraries and universities can partner together to support RRR and low-SES student success. The findings identified public libraries primarily provide access to reliable internet and technology, with face-to-face learning support provided through empathy, exam supervision, and referral to information and resources. Limitations in support were due to participants' insufficient data on local students' needs, small budgets, and their community-focussed mission. Key elements of successful partnerships established between public libraries and universities include communication, information sharing, established roles, goal setting, and

sustainability. Recommendations were provided to guide partnerships between public libraries and universities to support RRR low-SES student success. These include best practice for successful partnerships, professional development for public library and university staff, and future research. Overall, partnerships between public libraries and universities can improve RRR low-SES student success through increasing access to face-to-face learning support, open textbooks and resources, and reliable internet and technology.

<h1 style="text-align:center">References</h1>

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Australian public libraries statistical report 2021-22

The Australian public libraries statistical report 2021-2022 provides insight into the activities and usage of Australia's 1706 public library service points, and their changed usage during the mandatory closures and restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Statistics

1,706
library service points

with more than

42 million
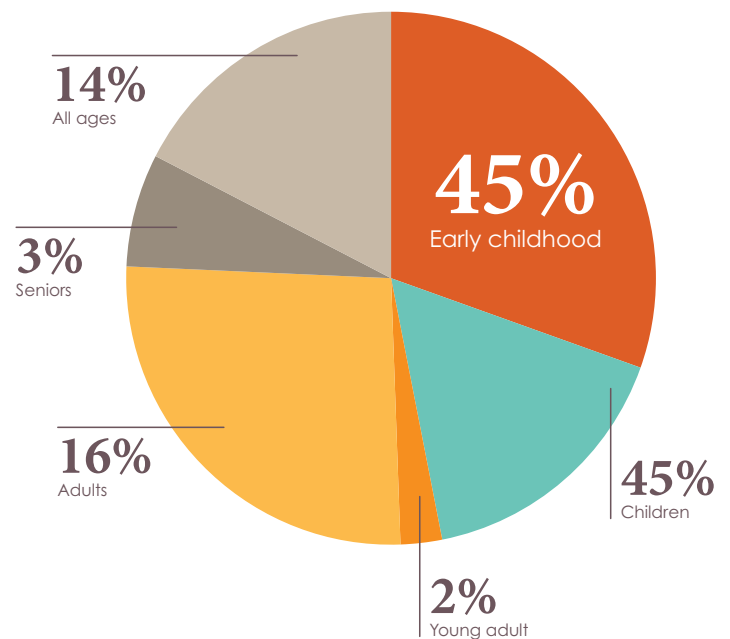collection items

146 million
instances of collection usage

3.5 million
program participants, online and in-person

Libraries are offering more programming for more people

- Overall, there were over 3.5 million participants in 259,000 library programs throughout the year.

- Libraries ran over 100,000 literacy programs, 17,000 workforce development programs, and 10,000 programs dedicated to digital inclusion. There was also a very high number of sessions aimed at an early childhood audience which reflects the important role libraries continue to play in pre-school literacy and learning.

- The diversity of programs on offer show libraries' response to community demand for programming aimed at particular life-stage demographics and needs.

Program sessions by target audience

14% All ages

3% Seniors

16% Adults

45% Early childhood

45% Children

2% Young adult

Collection usage remains steady

- Despite restrictions on in-person browsing and borrowing, total usage of public library collections was over 146 million instances, comprised of almost 103 million loans of physical items and more than 43 million loans, downloads and retrievals from electronic collections.

71%
Physical items

29%
Digital items
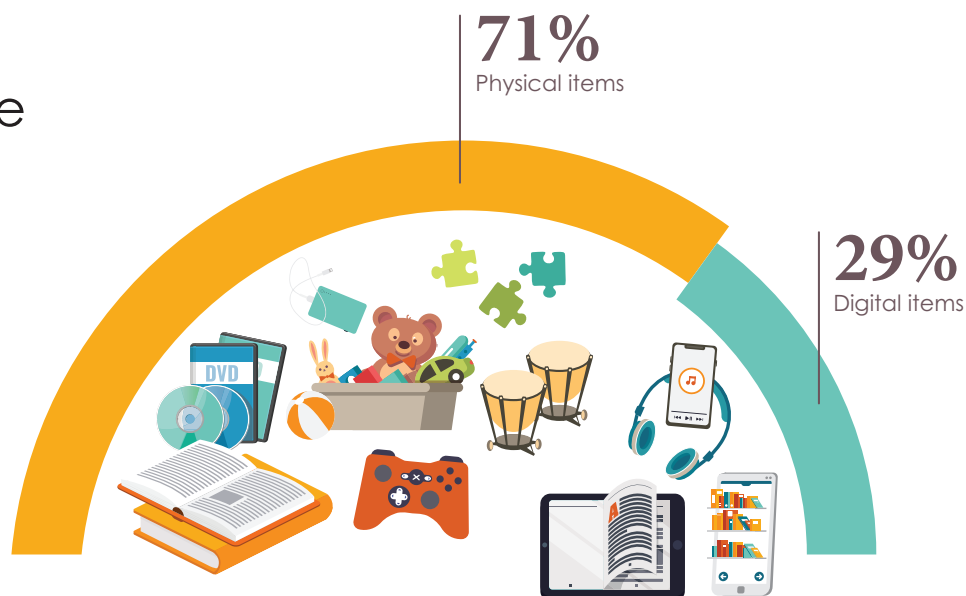
- Total collections of more than 42 million items (1.6 items per capita) were available for the use of the community, with expenditure of more than $135.83 million to ensure that these collections remained up to date and relevant.

Access to services is on the rise

- Access to public library services was provided through 1,706 service points, including 1,405 branches, 74 mobile outlets libraries serving hundreds of separate locations, and 227 other outlets.

- Whilst in-person visits to library facilities were still below pre-COVID more than 56 million physical visits were recorded.

- Library websites and catalogues had over 50,000,000 visits during the year.

- Libraries continued to provide the essential service of internet access, with patrons clocking up 4.8 million hours of wifi use across our branches.

- For the first time, libraries have reported on the number of hours booked in publicly available meeting rooms and spaces. Community groups, local organisations, library partners and individuals used these spaces for over half a million hours in 2021-22.

50+ million
website visits during the year

4.8 million
hours of wifi use across branches

500+ thousand
hours used in bookable meeting spaces