

# Supporting students: the educational contribution of Australia's public libraries

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‘If it is right that schools should be maintained by the whole community for the well being of the whole, it is right also that libraries should be so maintained.’  
*Andrew Carnegie*

*A report to the nation by  
Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA)  
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Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) is a nonprofit association established in 1994 as the world's second national association to foster, advise and support the increasing number of Friends of Libraries (FOL) groups throughout Australia. These groups and FOLA are the voice of the 60% of Australians who use and value their public libraries, and the many other people who support them as unique 'cradle to grave' educational, informational, cultural and recreational agencies freely available to people of all ages, backgrounds and circumstances.

Consistent with this position, in 2004 FOLA commenced a five year program of annual Reports to The Nation on issues critical to the development of public libraries to meet the needs of all Australians. Its first report *Australian BookStart: a national issue, a compelling case* focused on the importance of a nationally comprehensive approach to early childhood literacy development through parents and caregivers reading aloud to children 0-5 years, and of public libraries being funded to support this. The report, which is available at [www.foia.org.au](http://www.foia.org.au), has informed and contributed to national and state initiatives in the area.

The 2005 second Report to The Nation was *Community critical: Australian public libraries serving seniors*. This conveyed the importance of public libraries to the life quality of Australia's ageing population, and showed that many of those older Australians are underserved because of the physical and resource limitations of the public libraries to which they have access. The report is also available at [www.foia.org.au](http://www.foia.org.au).

This third Report to The Nation *Supporting students: the contribution of Australia's public libraries* was launched at FOLA's annual general meeting hosted by the Friends of Balmain Library NSW on 28 August 2006.

It is available at [www.foia.org.au](http://www.foia.org.au), and is being communicated to relevant Australian and state/territory ministers, local government, its national and state associations, public libraries, and educational bodies.

Copying of the report or parts of it for dissemination and discussion purposes is encouraged. FOLA welcomes feedback about the issues it raises through its president Dr Alan Bundy [alan.bundy@auslib.com.au](mailto:alan.bundy@auslib.com.au) PO Box 622 Blackwood SA 5051.

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The fourth FOLA Report to The Nation *Looking ever forward: Australia's public libraries serving children and young adults* will be available in late 2007.

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## Executive summary

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Public libraries uniquely provide support for lifelong learning from early childhood throughout adult life. They have also always provided support to school and other students within the formal educational system and endeavoured to cooperate with schools in improving that support.

A 2006 survey of Australian public libraries by Friends of Libraries Australia confirms that they receive high use from primary and secondary school students in particular, including home schooled children. For most of the respondents that use is increasing.

Many provide a wide range of services and resources to support students, including professional reference assistance, internet access, online homework tutoring, special collections, study spaces, and homework centres and clubs.

Barriers to improving support for students were cited most frequently as lack of space for individual and group study and information technology; lack of specialist library professional staff; restricted evening and weekend opening hours; slow internet speeds in country areas; and lack of cooperation or interest from schools.

Of particular value in disadvantaged socioeconomic areas of Australia would be a program of staffed homework centres in public libraries, following the success of centres in Australia, New Zealand and the large number in the UK. Also of advantage to students throughout Australia would be an online library chat reference service specifically to support school students, and greater access to an online tutoring service currently provided by about 60 public libraries, a growing number of independent schools, but very few government schools.

Most respondents considered that decision makers at all levels of government have little awareness of the contribution which public libraries make to educating Australians, or of the return on investment in them. This investment is currently equivalent to less than 1% of the national expenditure on institutional education.

At only 7c per Australian per day, public libraries are still not well funded for their multidimensional role, or to provide improved support for students. School libraries, particularly in the government sector, have generally experienced a reduced commitment to their role, funding and staffing by state/territory education departments and by individual schools. This is despite the substantial research evidence of a compelling link between well resourced school libraries and student achievement.

School libraries and public libraries should be pivotal to the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational experience, and the base for a positive attitude by young people towards information skills development, lifelong learning and enhancing their life chances.

For this to occur requires that schools and local authorities/state governments fund and staff their school and public libraries well to maximize the enduring benefits to students and teachers of their educational partnership. It also requires connected national, state and local government policy frameworks, and an expectation that schools and public libraries cooperate in supporting students.

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## Recommendations

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- 1 The Australian government request state/territory governments to provide information and commentary on the current levels of
    - 1.1 funding, and employment of qualified teacher librarians, in their primary and secondary schools. *page 8*
    - 1.2 funding, young people’s services and reference librarians employed, and homework tutoring and other student support services in their public libraries. *page 12*
    - 1.3 cooperation between their schools and public libraries in meeting students and teacher needs. *page 14*
  - 2 The Australian and state/territory governments fund local government for evaluated trials of staffed public library based homework centres in areas of socioeconomic and educational disadvantage. *page 11*
  - 3 The Australian and state/territory governments support the trial of a national, library based, online chat reference service for school students. *page 12*
  - 4 The Australian Local Government Association and state/territory local government associations encourage local government authorities to develop policies on lifelong learning and student support in their communities. *page 9*
  - 5 National and State Libraries Australasia encourage public libraries to develop policies on lifelong learning and student support for their communities. *page 10*
  - 6 National and State Libraries Australasia develop a methodology to enable public libraries to better assess their support for institutional education. *page 10*
  - 7 Friends of Libraries groups consult with their libraries about the support they provide for students and how they may contribute to improving that support.
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Australia's 1560 local public libraries have a unique multidimensional 'cradle to grave' or 'womb to tomb' user range and educational, literacy, informational, cultural, recreational, technological, social capital and democratic impact.

They are the most heavily used public buildings in Australia and the most valued local and state government community provision, used by 12 million Australians of all ages and circumstances and now available to 99% of them.

Consistent with international trends they are being recognised as the outstanding community investment, an indicator of which is that about 270 new or redeveloped libraries are being built between 2000-2007. However if public libraries are to achieve their full potential across Australia many need better buildings, opening hours, resources, technology, services, programs, professional and other staffing, websites, and marketing.

This requires a greater awareness by national, state/territory and local governments of how relatively poorly public libraries are funded – about 7c per Australian per day – and of the now demonstrable very high quantitative and qualitative return on investment they provide.

*Supporting students: the educational contribution of Australia's public libraries* aims to contribute to that awareness.

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## **The 21<sup>st</sup> century learning context**

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Since the publication in 1996 of the Unesco Delors report *Learning: the treasure within* lifelong learning has become an educational policy mantra throughout the developed world. However it will remain largely rhetorical if those in formal education think no further than curricula, content, pedagogies, assessment and certification. Numerous commentators have observed that the lifelong learning agenda risks domination by institutional educators who view it narrowly and perhaps with vested interest, and who are insensitive to the real contribution that public libraries and other learning organisations make to learning in the community. This is despite the evidence that people with a negative experience of institutional education are alienated from it, and are unlikely to pursue learning for life through it.

Public libraries have been described as 'the umbrella institution of the learning society' because, as one UK commentator has stated

Learning is not simply about following accredited courses to obtain qualifications. It is about gaining knowledge to lead better, more fulfilling lives. Such learning comes frequently in very small quanta...Public libraries are unique in the way that they can allow those tiny portions of learning to invisibly change people's lives.<sup>1</sup>

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## **The Australia formal educational context**

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This report, as its title indicates, is not however focused on the contribution which public libraries make to lifelong learning in all of its manifestations and outcomes. Rather it is focused on demonstrating the extent to which students in formal education, particularly in schools, have recourse to the services and resources of public libraries from preference, inadequate provision within their schools, or lack of home resources and support.

School education, particularly in the government sector, is receiving increasing political, public and media scrutiny about teacher and student performance, literacy development, pedagogies employed, curricula, assessment, testing and learning outcomes. This scrutiny – sometimes very ill informed – will doubtless continue throughout the century and beyond. On the whole it is healthy that it should do so, because nothing is more important for the future of society than how and what young people learn.

As educators concerned to help develop reading and information literate young people, teacher librarians in schools and public and academic librarians themselves tend to look askance at the processes of school education, and its apparent incapacity to pay more than lip service to the core importance of young people learning how to learn through curriculum integrated information literacy development – the capacity to recognise their need for information, and then identify, access, evaluate and apply the needed information.<sup>2</sup>

Thus a frequent lament of public librarians, academic librarians and university faculty is about the poor information awareness and skills of students in the school system, or who have recently graduated from it. The responses to the survey of public librarians reported later in this report confirms this.

There are no rapid solutions to the conundrum which is school and other formal education. However librarians would tend to suggest that schools, technical and further education (Tafe) colleges, and universities should all collaborate more in reconceptualising their curricula and pedagogies to develop the reading literacy and information literacy of students as the prerequisite for lifelong learning in a 21st world characterised by information abundance or ‘infoglut’.

Sir Michael Caine some years ago conveyed the sense of this in observing, as other autodidacts have done, that

I educated myself in the library, which means I found out for myself what I wanted to know. School taught me what I didn't know and what I should find out when I left school. School should really teach you how ignorant you are and what you want to find out.

Or as Mayor Richard Daley responded when questioned about his strong support for the revitalisation of Chicago's public library system

Libraries and schools are on a par with each other in terms of what we are trying to accomplish – which is to better educate society. *But the library scope extends even further than that of schools...*A library is an innovator and should play an integral and active role in that effort in every community.

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## **The public library as a learning agency**

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The international research and other literature on the public library as a learning agency is extensive, with many of the most recent reports and policy iterations coming from the UK, largely as an outcome of national government recognition of the need to reconceptualise, and reinvest in a British public library system which was once a world leader. Much of this endeavour and the issues being faced are covered well in a July 2006 book *Public libraries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: defining services and debating the future*.<sup>3</sup>

Under *Libraries and learning*<sup>4</sup> the following points are noted, points which equally apply to Australian public libraries and the public libraries of other developed countries.

- there is a growing awareness of the role that public libraries can play in delivering national and local learning agendas
- public library involvement in learning is a return to the 19<sup>th</sup> century roots of the public library movement
- the library community's understanding of learning, especially lifelong learning, is wider than that laid out in governmental and educational policy statements
- public libraries may still be overlooked as partners in local learning partnerships because of the focus on accredited learning
- the learning taking place in public libraries may be relevant to employment, skills development and the acquisition of qualifications but if it does not it is still necessary and valuable in its own right
- the public library is the ideal neutral and non threatening environment for learning, formal and informal, to occur
- public libraries have a record of personal service and impartiality
- they open longer hours than other study centres, and much longer hours and for many more days than schools and their libraries
- they readily partner with other learning providers and with other libraries
- they provide public ICT facilities and support
- they are increasingly involved in family learning and literacy initiatives designed to bring family members together to work on a common theme and planned activity. Children spend only 15 per cent of their time at school – the home and family can have a great impact on their literacy and learning, from birth onwards.

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## Education for the 21st century

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H G Wells in his 1920 treatise *The outline of history* asserted that human history was becoming a race between education and catastrophe. The intensity of that race is arguably greater now than it was at the end of the 'war to end all wars'. Wells did not, however, say what he meant by education, or for that matter exactly what he meant by catastrophe.

So what is meant by 'education'. Is it learning the three Rs? Is it learning physics, chemistry and maths? Is it learning languages or about a country's history and politics, geography and economy? Is it about values development? The current debate in Australia about the teaching of literacy, learning the facts and chronology of world and Australian history, outcomes based education, the value of homework, and about testing regimes sometimes suggests a black and white view of education.

Education, like democracy, however, means different things to different cultures and religions. Yet despite those sometimes intense differences and despite the apparent complexities in the formal educational process, for all aspects of educational purpose and outcomes there is a simple divide – it is never neutral.

As Ilich and Freire concluded, education's purpose is to either domesticate or liberate. It domesticates where knowledge is deposited into learners and where the relationship between the educator and the learner is that of subject to object. This, however, is surely not consonant with

thinking as the analysis of information, and the development of information literate people able to meet the Socratic ideal of challenging lazy assumptions.

The real educational challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is developing as many young people as possible to explore complex issues by generating webs of questions, to find what Michael Leunig calls the difficult truth.

Dr Samuel Johnson, the 18<sup>th</sup> century English savant and lexicographer observed that

Lectures were once useful, but now, when all can read and books are so numerous, lectures are unnecessary.

He would probably be surprised to discover that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the pervasive school and university pedagogy is still the teacher as authority, transmitting content readily available in libraries and elsewhere, through lectures or classes.

This is despite the fact that there is an overwhelming body of research and testimony from the field which shows that students do not learn effectively from this approach because it treats all students as if they are the same, with the same motivation to learn, the same interest in the subject, and the same ability to learn.

As one critic has stated

...there are many classrooms across the country that still operate on the principles that there is only one right answer, that the teacher is authority, that the student is empty and in need of filling, that scoring is the same as learning and that one size of tuition fits all – ideas that, if not actually past their use by date, are at least worth some serious review.<sup>5</sup>

And indeed that review has, unevenly, been occurring in many educational jurisdictions worldwide. In Australia the 1980s saw the beginning of a shift from teacher directed to enquiry based learning, particularly in secondary education with its increased emphasis on independent student research.

Unfortunately this shift usually did not take adequate account of the school and public library resource impacts, leaving students in an enquiry, resources and information skills vacuum.

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## **Public library support of institutional education**

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The failure – which is still the case – of education departments and individual schools to adequately staff and resource their libraries, stimulated a number of public and academic library initiatives to help school students from the late 1980s.

These included initiatives by the State Libraries, especially those of NSW and Victoria, the University of South Australia (National Periodicals Service for Schools), and by The University of Queensland (Cyberschool).

Such initiatives, and the levels of interaction and cooperation between schools and public libraries were assessed in a 2001 national survey of both. The report <sup>6</sup> of that survey reviewed library progress in Australia from the time of US Professor and Fullbright Lecturer Sara Fenwick's report *School and children's libraries in Australia*.<sup>7</sup> This was published in 1966 at a time when many schools lacked anything like a library, very few qualified teacher librarians

were available to be employed in them, and many parts of Australia still lacked a local public library, or a public library paying much attention to the needs of children and students.

Fenwick's 1964 six months of investigating and lecturing in Australia, and her report, addressed three major areas: school libraries, public library services for children, and the education of library professionals to be employed in them. It was a visit and report to have an enduring impact on school library development in Australia, and to a lesser degree on public libraries. The Menzies government proved to be receptive from 1968 to investing in a national school libraries program, but not in investing in public libraries as the educational complement of schools. These were to remain the responsibility of just the state/territory and local governments. In her report section *Cooperation between school and children's libraries* Fenwick asserted that

Both school and public library will be responsible for learning that will span lifetimes, and the education of children will be only the beginning...there must be continuous planning...especially of schools and public libraries, for this challenging common endeavour.<sup>8</sup>

Some 35 years later the 2001 survey of school and public libraries concluded that both often had a sense of that 'common endeavour' but that there was no evidence of higher or lower level planning or encouragement to facilitate it. Significant qualifiers of what progress might have been achieved in 35 years were

- different understandings and enthusiasms about the need for, the reality of, and the potential of interaction between schools and public libraries
- cooperation was often one sided, with essentially the public library pursuing its broad 'cradle to grave' mission
- cooperative agreements were usually informal
- lack of qualified teacher librarians particularly in primary schools, and a lack of qualified public librarians particularly in rural areas, inhibited understanding and cooperation
- funding, frequent school staff changes, time and access issues were other constraints to cooperation.

Since 2001 there has generally been resource, electronic, program and very limited staffing improvement in the capacity of public libraries to support the needs of students of all types. At the same time there have been further indications of a reduced commitment by state/territory education departments to school libraries well resourced with print and electronic resources, led by qualified teacher librarians working with classroom teachers to foster resource based learning and reading literate and information literate students. Self managing schools have also led to local shortsighted decisions about the role, resourcing and staffing of school libraries. A politically driven emphasis on the still largely unproven teaching and learning benefits<sup>9</sup> of , by international comparison, a very high investment in information technology in Australia, has also wasted public funds and tended to usurp the time of teacher librarians for network management, rather than working in partnership with classroom teachers. Too often lack of funds has inhibited investment in updating and broadening book and other print collections in secondary school libraries, providing no encouragement for students to read more and read more widely.

No state/territory education department can readily say how many qualified teacher librarians it employs, what the shortfalls are and what is its total investment in school libraries. This has impacted on the government school systems which are still responsible for the education of the majority of Australian children. It is salutary that at the same time as the overall neglect of

school libraries in those systems, schools in the independent sector are using their investment in new and well resourced libraries as part of their marketing to parents.

Although the Australian government school library situation is in need of national and state review and reinvestment, it has not yet generally reached the level of neglect which prompted a major review and outcry in Canada in 2003,<sup>10</sup> and major concerns about school libraries in US states such as California. This resulted in 2002 US\$250 million voted by the US Congress as dedicated funding for school libraries following a mounting body of research showing a compelling link between student achievement and well resourced and staffed school libraries.

Nonetheless the warning signs have been there for some time that Australian government schools in particular are often not supporting the needs of their students, and teachers, well. This is also true of some Tafe colleges; of small private education providers which may provide no libraries at all and tell their often international students to use public and other libraries; and even universities in their support of their distance education students.

Those warning signs were communicated in a 2003 report by the Australian Council for Educational Research<sup>11</sup> which reviewed the substantial research on the impact of school libraries on student achievement, but there is no indication that any state/territory education department has assessed the report's findings and commenced a reinvestment in school libraries as central to the educational process. This is an issue which should concern both the Australian government and the states and territories (*recommendation 1.1*).

That school, Tafe, private provider or university neglect leads to the question of what students researching a topic or subject do in response. Their options are limited

- 1 to do without and use whatever readers, photocopies and other resources with which they have been provided
- 2 to rely on typically inefficient and uncritical use of the internet – with all of its strengths and limitations – and then cutting, pasting and plagiarising from among the often overwhelming number of items they find
- 3 to purchase through the internet a paper written on their topic by someone else.

All three of those options are educational blind alleys. They lead to the antithesis of what educators should be endeavouring to develop in their students – a capacity for the effective and critical use of information, its translation into knowledge, and a desire to learn for life.

The only other option often available to information and resource deprived students is to use the broad resources and staff assistance of public, state and other libraries if they have access to them.

To provide an indication of the extent public libraries are now relied on as that option FOLA undertook in May 2006 a national survey of them.

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## **The Friends of Libraries Australia survey**

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A one page survey with eight questions was mailed to all Australian public library services, a total of 534 services with 1560 branches. The questions focused on identifying the policy commitment of local government authorities and libraries to supporting local learners, the extent

to which local public libraries are used by students, the services and facilities available to them, and the barriers to improved support.

Responses were requested by 16 June 2006, and no follow up of those libraries not responding was attempted. The response rate was 158, or about 29%. By comparison the 2004 FOLA survey had a 27% response, and the 2005 survey 33%.

Again, this level of response to a single request was not unexpected as a number of the individual public library services are very small rural libraries with no or very limited professional staff, particularly in Queensland and Western Australia.

About 9% of Australian public libraries are now joint use libraries in partnership with formal educational providers, the majority with high schools but also with Tafe and universities. This is most common in regional and rural areas and is most prevalent in South Australia where nearly 40% of public libraries are joint use. Consequently 12% of the survey respondents were doing so as libraries engaged in formally and informally supporting students.

All of the questions were answered by most of the respondents. Following is a summary of those responses as percentages, complemented by examples and commentary.

**1 Does your Council/s have a policy statement on lifelong learning and supporting students?**

Yes 5% No 92% Under development 3%

*Commentary* Two of the positive responses stated that the policy was part of the council's community learning and strategic plan. The responses indicate that probably less than 5% of Australian councils have considered their responsibility for fostering lifelong learning and student support within their communities, and very few aspire to be learning cities. This suggests a need for the Australian Local Government Association and the state local government associations to encourage discussion about the leadership contribution which councils can make to learning communities, and which just a few are doing already (*recommendation 4*).

The Australian Local Government Association recognises the importance of lifelong learning and has participated in some of the work undertaken by Adult Learning Australia(ALA) and the NCVER which is focused on encouraging local learning communities. This has included support of a 2006 'Learning opportunities through life' ALA sponsored project involving three Victorian councils, Hume, Darebin and Yarra Ranges.

However it would be desirable for the Association to take a stronger lead for local government in this area because local government is – largely through its public libraries used by 12 million people – in a broad sense already the largest learning provider in Australia. It seems likely that few involved in local government recognise that local government is now very much in the educational business of the nation.

**2 Does your library service have a policy statement on support for lifelong learning and students?**

Yes 24% No 62% Under development 4%

*Commentary* The number of libraries with a policy statement is considerably higher than the councils. However it is surprising that more public libraries have not yet articulated their rationale and policy for supporting lifelong learning and students.

**3 Have you ever surveyed student use of your library service?**

Yes 0.6% No 99.4%

*Commentary* Several negative responses stated that students were included in their general client surveys. However the very low positive response rate suggests vulnerability for public library services in convincing councils and state governments of the extent to which they support students. Although there are privacy and other issues in surveying library users, public libraries need to find a more systematic way of identifying and recording how and why students are using them (*recommendation 6*).

#### 4 *Estimated use of your library service by students*

	<i>Very high</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Low</i>
Primary school students	35%	60%	3%	2%
Secondary school students	14%	32%	50%	4%
Tafe students	2%	15%	42%	31%
University students	3%	12%	31%	54%
International students	6%	13%	21%	60%
Adult education students	0%	22%	43%	35%
University of the Third Age students	1%	28%	26%	45%

*Commentary* None of the respondents had any statistical basis for their estimates, or way of identifying whether students were using their library to assist in their studies, or as a general user of the library. Some thus stated difficulty in providing even estimates. The lower percentages for non school students reflect the fact that many public libraries do not have a Tafe college, university campus etc within their catchment area. Similarly, relatively few public libraries experience much identifiable use by international students but those that do in the capital cities – including the state libraries – report very heavy use by such students enrolled with Tafe, private providers and universities. Any state or city promoting itself as a destination for more international students needs to consult with its public libraries about the likely impact on them.

#### 5 *Is student use increasing, steady or decreasing?*

*Increasing* 63%

*Steady* 30%

*Decreasing* 7%

*Commentary* A few responses indicated that factors in increasing use included new buildings and better hours of opening at weekends. It was also suggested that steady or declining use, largely reported by country libraries, was in part a consequence of no population growth or population decline. The availability of internet access and online resources, better weekend opening, and a growing number of attractive and spacious new libraries has encouraged greater library use by the general population. All of these factors may be contributing to the large number of libraries reporting increased student use of them.

#### 6 *Describe your library's facilities and services which help students*

Specified were

- online homework tutoring service
- homework centres/clubs
- special support to home schooling groups
- bulk loans to home schoolers
- mobile library visits to schools
- research/reference librarian always available
- young people's librarian to coordinate support for students
- group study rooms
- study carrels
- study courtyard
- free internet, wireless access and data outlets for laptops
- internet accessible catalogue
- photocopiers and printers
- free photocopying and printing
- wide range of electronic databases
- ebooks
- website links to useful resources
- interlibrary loans
- school/Tafe student group visits
- evening and weekend opening
- HSC collection
- topical issues collection
- bulk loans to teachers
- computer suite accessible 24/7
- audiovisual equipment
- refreshment facilities
- pathfinders and brochures
- local studies collection
- unique research materials
- language learning facilities
- separate zones for primary and secondary students

- events program for students
- research and relax club
- school holiday programs
- promotion of the *AskNow!* online reference service, which is staffed by librarians across Australia and coordinated through the National Library of Australia.

*Commentary* Public libraries have always assisted students – not infrequently through their parents – with their homework, projects and assignments. Most of these are not self generated requests by students but are described in the research literature<sup>12</sup> as ‘imposed queries’, the primary imposer for secondary school students in particular being the classroom teacher. This raises the question of who is really the school or public library user, the student or the teacher? In turn this has implications for the policies, performance and evaluation of library reference services, which have received inadequate attention from public libraries to date.

This is particularly as more public libraries are now providing access to a wider range of electronic resources, and the online tutoring service in core curriculum subjects of yourTutor which is now available in over 60 public libraries nationwide. A growing number of private schools are subscribing to this tutoring service for their students, but only eight government schools are, all of them in Western Australia. Two of these eight are Pilbara schools, with the service funded by BHP Billiton as a community initiative. For government school students their only access to this service is therefore likely to be through a public library service. The service now enables any library member to connect with a tutor by using their library card to log in from home.<sup>13</sup>

The real value of ‘homework’ continues to be debated. However, noteworthy from the survey responses is the extent that – often with limited and short term funding – public libraries are endeavouring to meet a student homework need which is not met by their own schools. These usually close their libraries in the middle of the afternoon when school teaching finishes for the day, and during school holidays.

Australian public libraries are slowly following the international trend and providing homework centres, especially in areas of economic and social disadvantage where home support and study conditions for children may be poor. The City of Auckland with NZ government support, for example, has initiated such centres to help children in its large Maori and Polynesian populations who are often disadvantaged by poor and crowded home study conditions.

Over 90 per cent of local authorities in the UK now have at least one such centre in their public library systems, and the UK government is requiring them to provide more. A study of them<sup>14</sup> reported that structured study support in public libraries works very well. Beyond their educational role, they ease the transition from primary to secondary education, help young people to assert their individuality, and provide support and pastoral care not always available in the home or at school. The key characteristics of such centres, perhaps best called ‘student help centres’ are welcoming and attractive accommodation, electronic access, trained librarians, and preferably trained teachers, to assist the students (*recommendation 2*).

The FOLA survey also produced a few responses which mentioned promotion of the national online Asknow! chat reference service, which is coordinated through the National Library.<sup>15</sup> This service was established as a general resource for all Australians, not as a homework service for school students.

However, from its 2006 evaluation Asknow! identified that

- sixty per cent of its users are under 24 years, broadly consistent with the fact that 84 per cent of 18-24 year olds use the internet
- school students use the service in large numbers during peak periods and often from computers at school
- half of Asknow! users use the service for study purposes and school assignments
- questions from school students are often subject based
- students are often unskilled in clarifying or explaining their information need
- this lack of student information literacy requires considerable time and skilled reference interview techniques from Asknow! librarians.

With funding from National and State Libraries Australasia and the federal Dept of Education, Science and Training, the National Library of Australia is currently (August 2006) managing a project to consider the development of an online reference service specifically for school students. This project will report on consultation with education authorities and develop a detailed proposal for a pilot service. It will look at overseas models including the New Zealand AnyQuestions service which is targeted at school students in a jurisdictional context perhaps more amenable to ready national cooperation between education authorities

and public libraries than is the case in Australia. The project will also be considering linkages with commercial services such as yourTutor (*recommendation 3*).

The earlier Australian Asknow! and the newer (2005) New Zealand AnyQuestions services have been sharing their experience. The complex issues faced by AnyQuestions in responding to its users, mostly students 9-14 years old, are described in a 2005 conference paper.<sup>16</sup> The service aims to give

...all school children in New Zealand their own free guide to help them find good quality, trusted information amongst the millions of pages on the internet. It is a people based service making use of technology to help children be independent library users.

AnyQuestions is a collaborative venture including the National Library of New Zealand, the Ministry of Education, and public libraries.

#### **7 *Barriers to improving student support***

Specified were

- poor local government support
- schools not responsive/cooperative/interested
- failure by schools/teachers to advise potential demands by students
- primary schools with no libraries/qualified teacher librarians
- no local Tafe library/librarian
- poor information skills of students
- poor discrimination by students/parents in internet use
- poor reading ability of students, especially boys
- distance from schools
- lack of space for individual/group study
- lack of skilled reference librarians
- lack of youth services librarian
- overall lack of staff
- internet access/slow speeds/charges/no USB flash device access
- no reference desk
- poor evening/weekend hours
- technology upgrade costs
- bad location of the library
- branches too small to provide study areas
- poor public transport
- school buses in country areas leave straight from school.

*Commentary* The barriers most frequently listed were lack of space, lack of library specialist staff, inadequate opening hours, slow internet speeds in country areas, and lack of school interest and cooperation (*recommendation 1.2*).

#### **8 *Is there enough awareness by decision makers of the contribution which public libraries make to educating Australians?***

Yes 12%

No 88%

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## **Observations by survey respondents**

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These included

- There is very little recognition of what public libraries do and contribute.
- Decision makers are not aware of the contribution public libraries make to educating Australians, but this is because public libraries have not done enough to promote their role.
- Decision makers *are* aware of the educational contribution of public libraries – they just choose not to fund it.

- Teachers are largely unaware of public library resources and school timetables are too rigid to take advantage of useful library events.
- We are happy with study use of the library but we are also trying to encourage student use of it for reading and recreation use.
- We are serving an industry of private international colleges in the area.
- As a country library we have many users who are enrolled in tertiary distance education programs – their institutions seem to expect them to access a very considerable amount of resources.
- Our combined school and public library ensures great student use, interaction between all age groups in the community, and a broader range of resources.
- We have information skills development programs for students but still cannot reach those who need them most.
- In our rural area only high school students have easy access to the library.
- We often seem to be serving the parents of students, not the students themselves.
- Public libraries provide much support for home schoolers, particularly in rural areas.
- The really big question is, should we provide what students want, or what we believe they need?
- School libraries in NSW are so poorly funded and open such ridiculous hours, it is no wonder school students flock to the public library.
- We have established a network of school and public libraries to approach student needs cohesively.
- Public libraries must be recognised by governments as playing a vital role in the educational process from early childhood right through adult life. If ever there was an organisation which can claim a role in supporting students and in lifelong learning, the public library is it.

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## **Opportunity and challenge**

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Public libraries already demonstrably provide considerable support to formal education and its students, and are in a unique position to do so. Student demand on public libraries is tending to increase for a variety of reasons but there is still little indication of awareness or concern about this from governments, education departments and individual schools.

This is an international phenomenon, experienced in other countries such as the US, Canada and the UK, and is a concern often raised by the public library sector in those and other countries. Scandinavian countries such as Denmark and Norway have attempted to address the issue more systematically through national policy statements requiring cooperation between schools and public libraries (*recommendation 1.3*).

As UK educator Geoffrey Dubber concluded

Education needs libraries. We need your professional skills to help us bring to our pupils the information skills they need to approach the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our need of you is developing all the time, and our professions must grow in understanding one another.<sup>17</sup>

There is a major opportunity for partnerships between schools and public libraries in the education of young people, but it is one which largely requires an awareness and attitudinal shift by educational bureaucracies, individual schools and their teachers. At present there is a major disconnect between school education and its awareness of school and public libraries. This disconnect is not serving young people, and their future, at all well.

It is unlikely that this shift will occur without policy leadership, expectation of cooperation, and support by government at all levels – national, state and local.

The issue is thus one of recognition and of funding to enable educational and public libraries to achieve their full potential contribution to Australia's future. At a total annual cost of only \$600 million – about 80% from local government, 20% from state/territory governments, and nothing from the national government – Australia's public libraries are manifestly lacking funding appropriate to their roles and the increasing demands on them.

That \$600 million is the equivalent of less than 1% of the quantum expended – sometimes not wisely – on institutional education in Australia each year.

Many institutions and experiences contribute to every individual's lifelong educational experience. Friends of Libraries Australia considers that a national, state and local government policy and funding recognition of the special contribution which Australia's public and other libraries do, and can, make to that educational experience, is long overdue.

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***If it is right that schools should be maintained by the whole community for the well being of the whole, it is right also that libraries should be so maintained.*** Andrew Carnegie 1904

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