

INVESTING IN AUSTRALIA'S FUTURE THROUGH ITS PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM – WHY, WHO, HOW



Overview

Australia now has a comprehensive and very heavily used public library system. This has developed in only the last 50 years, largely through state/territory and local government partnership. However Australia still invests sparingly and unevenly in that system. Some children, young people, adults and older adults in Australia have ready access to public libraries with modern spacious buildings and good staffing, resources, services, programs, technology, websites, levels of innovation, and hours of opening. Many others do not. At the current level of investment in the system, some never will.

Public libraries have a unique multidimensional capacity to benefit people educationally, socially, economically and culturally from 'cradle to grave'. Communities also benefit from the learning, information, recreation, life quality, community connection and social capital they provide. The effectiveness of the public library system impacts on the policy areas of at least seven of the Australian government's ministerial portfolios, and a similar number in the states and territories.

International research shows a public library return on investment of between \$4 and \$6 for every dollar invested. Twelve million people in Australia, or 60% of the population, are users of its public library system, and make over 100 million visits to libraries a year. One-third of those users are children, school and other students. In the world of work Australia will increasingly need to compete in a changing economic climate at the high value segment of the market. It makes educational and economic sense for it to invest in all of its libraries.

Yet in 2006 Australia invested only \$743million in its public library system of 1560 libraries, \$630million of it from local government and the balance largely from state and territory governments. This was \$36 per capita, 9.8 cents per Australian per day, 0.07% of Australia's GDP, half of the annual budget of a large university with just 30,000 students, and the equivalent of 2% of the national investment in school education. The school system receives 50 times the funding of the public library system. This is despite the much broader user age range within the public library system; that it has 4 times the number of users of school education; that it supports preschoolers; that one-third of its users are children and students; that it complements school education; and that about 130 public libraries are now combined with school and other educational libraries as joint use libraries.

Other countries invest more than Australia per capita in their public library systems – Denmark, for example, over three times as much. Australia as a whole has the wealth – and the literacy, educational, economic, lifelong learning and equity of opportunity incentives – to emulate them. For this to happen requires

- agreement by all three levels of Australian government – national, state/territory, local – of the need for their partnership in improving Australia's public library system
- their commitment to an *Australian Public Libraries Strategic Framework and Action Plan*
- their involvement in an *Australian Public Libraries Summit* to identify the priorities and how they should share and coordinate responses to those priorities.

Pervasive national educational change and improvement will not be achieved or sustained without greater investment in the Australian public library system. That system now needs to be strategically positioned within a broad national educational and whole of government context.

Introduction

The paper is available on the Friends of Libraries Australia website www.fola.org.au

This paper was prepared in January 2008. It aims to assist with the strategic positioning of Australia's public library system within a whole of Australian government and national educational context. The paper, and extracts from it, may be freely used with attribution to inform

- The Australian people
- Ministers and their advisers in the Australian, state and territory governments
- Local government elected members and management
- Public library managers and their staff
- Friends of Libraries groups
- The media
- Associations and agencies representing the interests of public libraries and their users, including the Australian Local Government Association, Australian Library and Information Association, Friends of Libraries Australia, National and State Libraries Australasia, Public Libraries Australia, and state and territory based associations.

The paper identifies the pressing need for the development of an *Australian Public Libraries Strategic Framework* and *Action Plan* to achieve sustained improvement of Australia's public library system.

The premises are that

- an educational revolution and economic development in Australia requires more than investment in certificated institutional education and training
- public libraries are unique and very heavily used multidimensional 'cradle to grave' community hubs for lifelong learning which provide a foundation for, and complement, formal education
- Australia currently invests sparingly and unevenly in its public library system
- Australia has the capacity to invest much more in that system
- The return on coordinated greater investment will be significant in meeting national, state/territory and local government policy objectives.

Australia's library and information services sector comprises the public library system, the national, state and territory libraries, the educational institutions (university, TAFE and school libraries), and specialist libraries and information services in private sector organisations and government departments. The sector accounts for about \$2.5 billion in annual recurrent expenditure, of which the public library system is the largest at \$743 million.

The national context

Whole of government priorities

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) at its 20 December 2007 meeting recognised the importance of Commonwealth and state/territory cooperation for the benefit of the whole of the Australian community. It identified seven areas for its 2008 work agenda

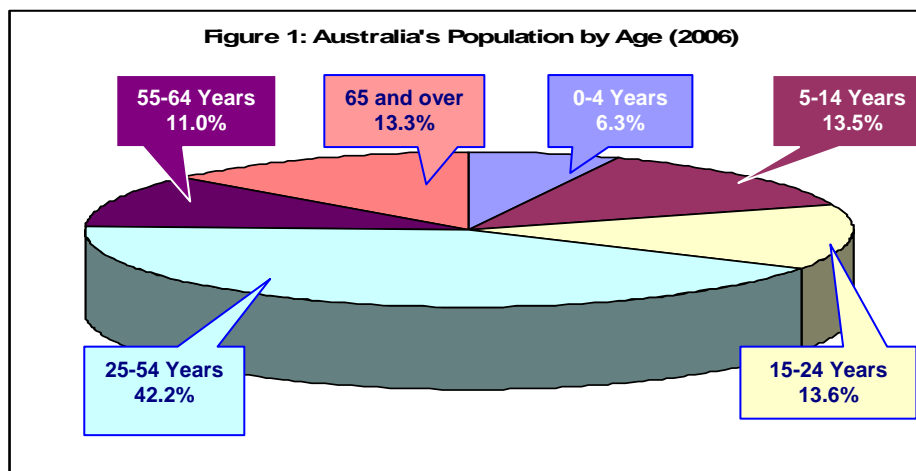
- Health and ageing
- The productivity agenda – including education, skills, training and early childhood
- Climate change and water
- Infrastructure
- Business regulation and competition
- Housing
- Indigenous reform.

The investment in the nation’s public library system, and its condition, contribution and potential, have never been considered by the three levels of Australian government together. It is time for this to occur as a whole of government priority, led by the Australian government through COAG.

Economy and population

Australia’s service-dominant economy has a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$1 trillion. It is the 14th largest global economy, representing 1.7% of global GDP. Australia achieves this with 21.2 million people – 0.3% of the world’s population of 6.6 billion. Australia’s workforce is 10.5 million.

Eighty-five per cent of Australia’s population lives around its coastline. Indigenous Australians comprise 2.3% of the Australian population. The median age of Australia’s population is 37 years. Nearly a quarter of the Australian population is aged 55 years or older, and 19.8% is under the age of 15 (Figure 1). Australia’s population is projected to grow to just over 23 million by 2016.



Source: ABS Census 2006

International public library trends

Nations such as the UK, Denmark, Finland and Singapore have recognised that their economic and societal development depend on investment in literacy, education and lifelong learning. They have also recognised that developing national public library strategic frameworks and investing well in their public library systems make major contributions to all three, from early childhood onwards.

In 2007 the European Commission surveyed public opinion on values within the European Union (EU). Over 25,000 people were interviewed in the 27 member states. Several countries consistently featured as having populations with high rates of participation in a range of community valued activities.

The countries with the highest public library participation rated by their communities included Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Ireland. The Scandinavian countries are the highest per capita spenders on public libraries within the OECD. They, and Ireland, invest more than Australia per capita in their public library systems. Denmark, for example, invests over three times as much per capita as Australia.

Ireland's *Branching Out* initiative, launched in 1998, witnessed a dramatic increase in Ireland's central government funding of public libraries, matched by local library authorities whose contribution more than doubled between 1998 and 2006. *Branching Out* was implemented in the context of two main government priorities

- to ensure that Ireland moved rapidly to embrace the opportunities of the Information Society
- to establish an inclusive society in which all citizens can participate fully in the social and economic life of the country.

The provision of internet access computers in public libraries was an important social inclusion. There has been recent government investment in Wi-Fi for Ireland's 353 public libraries. Ireland's public library services are available to schools, day care centres, hospitals and to other community service points. Its Department of Education and Science provides over A\$7 per capita to library authorities to provide services to primary schools.

Early 2007 saw the *New Zealand Public Libraries Summit: shaping the future of our libraries*, a possible precedent for Australia. Representatives from government, business, education and libraries met to discuss the future of New Zealand's public libraries and create an *Agenda for Action*. The summit was hosted by Hon Judith Tizard, Minister responsible for the National Library, the Hon Mark Burton, Minister for Local Government, and Basil Morrison, President of Local Government New Zealand.

Discussions about the future of New Zealand's public libraries formally began with the release of *Public libraries of New Zealand: a strategic framework 2006-2016*. The strategic framework emphasises the vital role that public libraries play in community life, and addresses the challenges that public libraries face in meeting future demands. It was launched in May 2006 as the result of consultation and collaboration between libraries, local government, the national government and other key groups.

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the US based *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation* seeks to ensure that all people, especially those with the fewest resources, have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Total investments by the foundation to date to support access to computers and the internet in US public libraries are in excess of US\$325 million (over US\$1 per capita).

The foundation has worked in partnership with US libraries since 1997 with one goal – to ensure that every person who can reach a public library can reach the internet. Nearly every US public library offers computer and internet services, and 14 million people (4.7% of the population) rely on these computers to further their education, and to find employment, health, and government information.

Australia's Northern Territory Library was the recipient of a 2007 US\$1million award from the Gates Foundation. This recognised the library's innovative approach to bringing computer and internet technology to remote Indigenous communities.

Australia's public library system

Australia's public library system of 1560 libraries and 8,000 staff now provides access, services, programs and resources to nearly all Australians – inlibrary, electronically and by outreach. Of those people who may not use public libraries regularly at different times in their lives, research shows that they usually rate highly their existence value, and support their public funding.

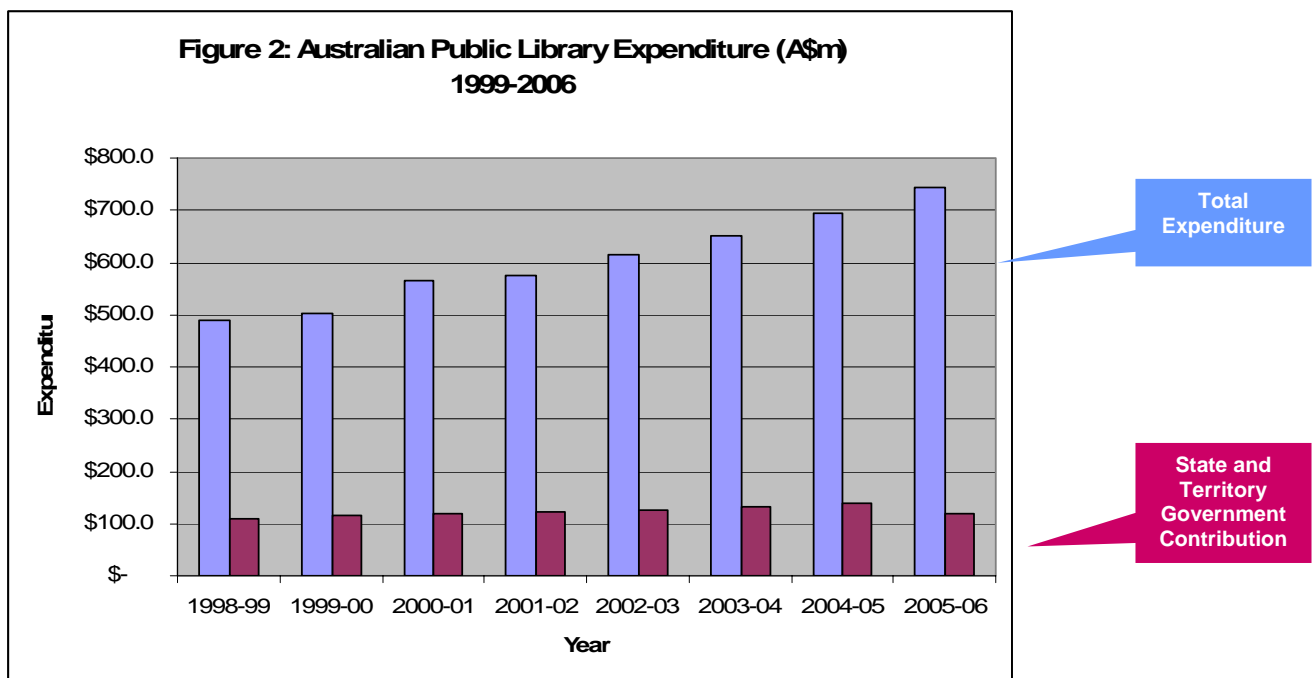
Twelve million Australians – 60% of the population and more than the total Australian workforce – are public library users. About one-third of these users are children, school and other students.

The public library system in 2006 experienced 108 million visits, lent 178 million items, provided 6,500 public access internet terminals (3.1 internet terminals per 10,000 people). \$743 million was invested in its resources and operations. This was \$36 per capita; 9.8c per Australian per day; 0.07% of Australia's GDP; the equivalent of 2% of the national investment in school education; and half the budget of a large university with just 30,000 students compared with the 12 million users of the public library system.

The total expenditure on public libraries increased from \$489 million in 1999 to \$743 million in 2006. There is a researched return on investment (ROI) of \$4 to \$6 for every dollar invested in them.

Local government contributed 78% of total public library expenditure in 1999 and 84% (around \$630m) in 2006. This in turn represented 3% of total 2006 local government expenditure. Australia's local government provides a significant and increasing proportion of essential services and infrastructure which underpin local communities. Public libraries are by far the most heavily used and valued of those services, even when they are deficient.

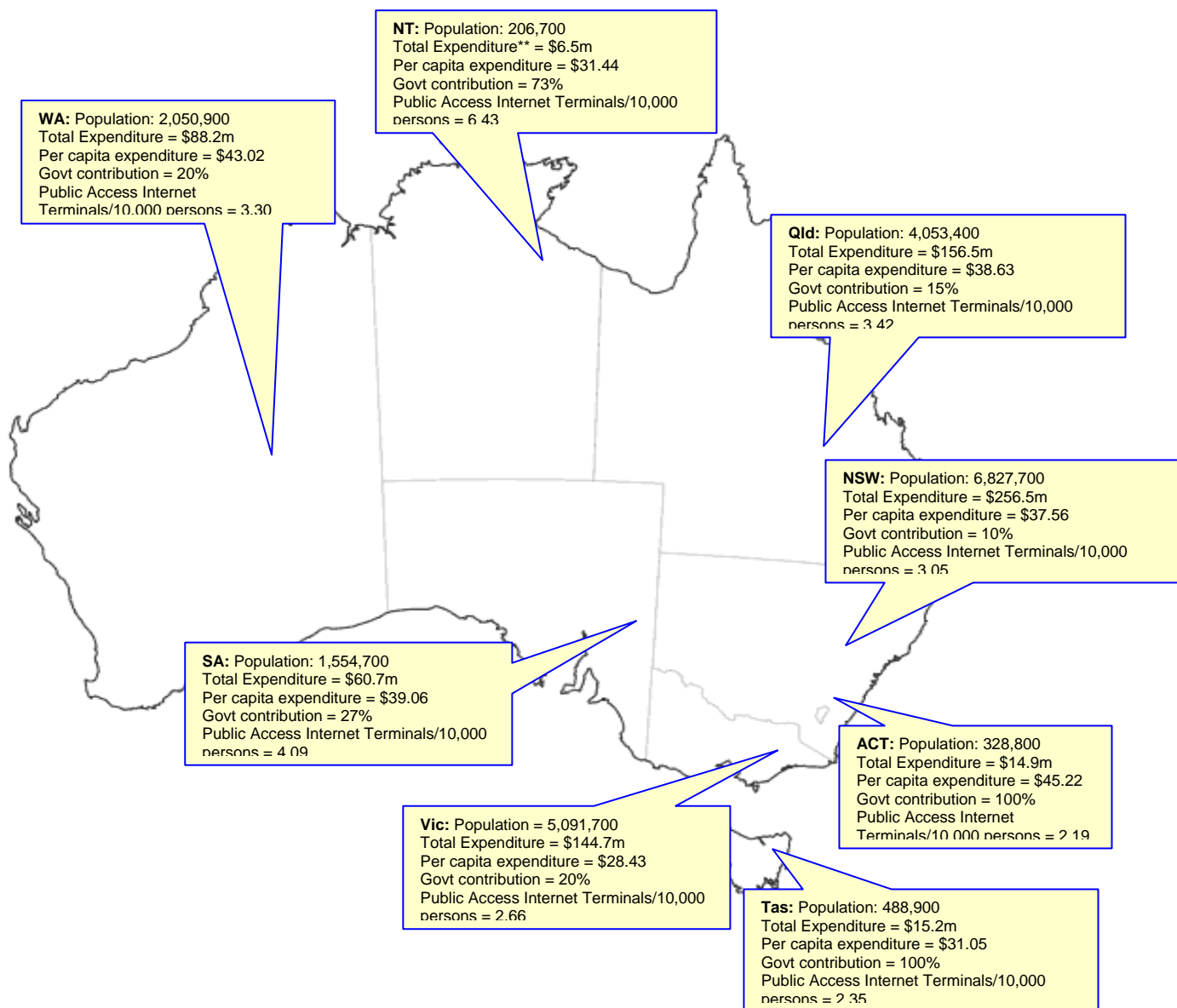
The annual overall contribution of state/territory governments to public library expenditure has declined from 22% in 1999 to 16% in 2006 (Figure 2).



Source: National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) Australian Public Libraries Statistics Reports 1999-2006

For NSW, the largest state with 30% of Australia’s population, the overall 2006 public library expenditure was \$256.5 million (Figure 3). The NSW State Government contributed only 10% (and in 2007/08 around 7%) of this expenditure. This 2006 figure was \$3.76 per capita or 1c per NSW resident per day, by far the lowest per capita contribution of any state or territory government. Queensland is the next lowest at about 14% in 2006/7, a reduction from 24% less than ten years ago. They are followed by Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia, the NT, Tasmania and the ACT.

Figure 3: Some characteristics of Australia's public library system in 2006



Source National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) Australian Public Libraries Statistics Report 2005-2006

Note Total expenditure** is Total expenditure on public library services including the purchase of library materials

The PricewaterhouseCoopers 2006 report, *National financial sustainability study of local government*, indicated that between 10%-30% of Australia's councils have financial sustainability problems. This also reflects the findings of state reports that between 25% and 40% of councils analysed could be unsustainable. The 2007 Queensland report will result in enforced local government mergers and larger councils in Queensland from 15 March 2008.

There is a significant question about the ability of small population and revenue-poor councils to improve their investment in public libraries, or even to continue to contribute to public library annual operating expenditures at levels at least equal to current funding plus library resources inflation (which tends to be higher than national CPI). Further restructuring of local government in Australia could facilitate better investment in public libraries in some states.

The major issues for both the *reality* and *potential* of Australia's public library system is

- better recognition of its return on investment in helping to meet a wide range of national, state/territory and local governmental policy agendas
- improving the willingness and capacity of local government to invest in it strategically
- recognition by state/territory governments of the urgency of reinvestment in that funding and support partnership between them and local government which underpinned the development of public libraries for all in Australia from the 1950s.

There is now relatively, and absolutely, low funding of public libraries by most states and territories. They may claim that the relative decline is a consequence of local government choosing to increase its funding. This would be sophistry. It would obfuscate the reality that what *both* state/territory *and* local governments are now needing to invest in is a sophisticated and connected public library system with much widened roles, responsibilities, technologies, usage and potential compared with the book and information providers of 30 years ago.

Towards a literate, reading, learning, and knowledge nation

As a national whole of government issue, the needed improvement of the Australian public library system is highly relevant to COAG, and to the new Australian government's *Education Revolution*. That system impacts on at least seven of the Australian government's ministerial portfolios, and to numerous related state/territory ministerial portfolios.

- **Health and Ageing** – *especially through providing a wide range of print and digital health and ageing information resources, bibliotherapy, large print and audio resources, services to the homebound and aged care facilities, and support for the University of the Third Age.*
- **Education, Employment and Workplace Relations** – *especially through early childhood education and literacy development, BookStart programs for babies, library storytimes, school education support, home schooling support, homework centres, online homework tutoring, school holiday programs, engaging young people, and supporting lifelong learning.*
- **Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy** – *especially through access to internet computers and training, digital information resources, and to e-government.*
- **Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government** – *especially through providing equity of information and cultural access to regional and rural populations, and as the most heavily used and valued community service provided largely through local government.*
- **Environment, Heritage and the Arts** – *especially environmental information, displays, local history collections, and development of a reading and knowledge nation.*
- **Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs** – *especially through providing community information, a safe place to go, meeting rooms, access to JPs, legal resources, family reading centres, programs to support single parents and their children, Indigenous Knowledge Centres providing community learning resources and spaces for Indigenous people, and in providing Indigenous information and resources for the general community.*

- **Immigration and Citizenship** – *especially through providing access to resources and programs in languages other than English, neutral meeting places, access to JPs, legal resources, Australian history resources, community information, internet access, venues and resources for English language development for people of all ages, and bilingual storytimes.*

Public library futures: issues and responses

Relative to Australia's overall wealth and taxation revenues, the total national investment in its public library system is very small. Even if tripled it would still be relatively small – but the return would be higher than on any comparable national investment.

The major barrier to greater investment in Australia's public library system is *not* lack of money. Rather the barrier is lack of connected comprehension at all levels of government of what public libraries provide, of how much they are used and valued, and what they have the demonstrable potential to provide.

The challenge in changing the political and bureaucratic mindset about decent investment in Australia's public library system is the very multidimensionality and user age and social range of public libraries which makes them unique and so valuable. Because of that multidimensionality, as 'umbrella institutions of the learning society' they do not locate comfortably within any one political or bureaucratic portfolio or department. This has circumscribed their political visibility, recognition and clout.

No single national government portfolio or department has ever accepted responsibility for strong oversight of their development, and holding their funding partners to account for their investment in the system. State governments have tended to shirk their responsibilities for them, and too often effectively shifted library improvement costs to local government. Local government has a better record of support for them, but that support has been very variable. This is especially in terms of percentages of council rate revenues provided to public libraries. Nationally these range from less than 2% to 6% and over. Why?

If a better, more accessible, public library system for all in Australia is to be achieved, the 'blame game' and avoidance of individual and collective responsibility for that system must change.

Critical to how this will happen is a commitment by all three levels of Australian government to an *Australian Public Libraries Strategic Framework and Action Plan*.

Critical to the implementation of this Framework and Plan is an *Australian Public Libraries Summit* – involving all levels of government and other stakeholders – to shape the future of the public library system and its capacity to provide better, more accessible libraries for all in Australia during the 21st century.

Sources

Australian Census 2006 (ABS)

<http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/ABSNavigation/prenav/ProductSelect?newproducttype=QuickStats&btnSelectProduct=View+QuickStats+%3E&collection=Census&period=2006&areacode=0&geography=&method=&productlabel=&producttype=&topic=&navmapdisplayed=true&javascript=true&breadcrumb=LWLP&topholder=0&leftholder=0¤taction=201&action=401&textversion=false>

ABS Trade Feature Article: 100 Years of International Trade Statistics

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/5368.0Feature%20Article1Oct%202007?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=5368.0&issue=Oct%202007&num=&view=>

Australian Trade Fact Sheet. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

<http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/fs/aust.pdf>

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/public/media/annualreports/annualreport06/AR2006Statements.html>
<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/GlobalDevelopment/GlobalLibraries/Announcements/Announce-070820.htm>

Bundy, A Build a library, build a clever country Editorial *Sydney Morning Herald* 22 December 2007

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/build-a-library-build-a-clever-country/2007/12/21/1198175338142.html>

Bundy, A *Sex, lies and politics: public library funding futures* Presented at QPLA conference 17 September 2007

<http://www.fola.org.au/pdfs/Bundy%20paper.pdf>

Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG) ALP media release 20 December 2007.

<http://www.alp.org.au/media/1207/mspm200.php>

Country Briefings Australia - Economic Data. The Economist Intelligence Unit 7 November 2007

<http://www.economist.com/countries/Australia/profile.cfm?folder=Profile-Economic%20Data>

DFAT Annual Reports 2005-06 and 2006-07

http://www.dfat.gov.au/dept/annual_reports/05_06/figures/13.html
http://www.dfat.gov.au/dept/annual_reports/06_07/downloads/full.pdf

Dividends: the value of public libraries in Canada 1997 Toronto, Book and Periodical Council

Friends of Libraries Australia *Better, more accessible, public libraries for all in Australia* Letter to the Australian Prime Minister 2 December 2007

International Monetary Fund (IMF). World economic outlook database

<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2007/02/weodata/index.aspx>

Ireland Library Council Annual Report 2006

http://www.librarycouncil.ie/publications/documents/Library_Council_Annual_Report_2006.pdf
<http://www.librarycouncil.ie/public/overview.shtml#branch>
<http://www.librarycouncil.ie/publications/documents/276iln.pdf>
http://www.librarycouncil.ie/publications/documents/2007Summary_000.pdf

Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) *Global economic presentation* Dr Peter Barnard, MLA Economist.

Missingham, R 2005 *Libraries and economic value: a review of recent studies*

<http://www.nla.gov.au/nla/staffpaper/2005/missingham8.html>

New Zealand Public Libraries Strategic Framework

Public libraries of New Zealand : a strategic framework 2005 to 2015 : consultation and questions
http://www.lianza.org.nz/library/files/store_009/PublicLibrary_brochure.pdf
<http://www.lianza.org.nz/news/newsroom/news1172006311.html>
Public Libraries of New Zealand : A Strategic Framework 2005 to 2015 : Consultation Document
http://www.lianza.org.nz/library/files/store_008/PublicLibrary_consultation_document.pdf

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

http://www.oecd.org/pages/0,3417,en_36734052_36734103_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

http://www.oecd.org/countrieslist/0,3351,en_33873108_33844430_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

Personal correspondence between Robert McEntyre and LIANZA, the National Library of NZ, and Wellington City Council Libraries

Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2006. *National financial sustainability study of local government*. A report commissioned by the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA)

<http://www.alga.asn.au/policy/finance/pwcreport/>

Public Libraries Statistics Reports 1999-2006. NSLA

<http://www.nsla.org.au/publications/statistics/2006/pdf/NSLA.Statistics-20061102-Australian.Public.Library.Statistics.Report.2005.2006.pdf>

Vårheim, A, Steinmo, S and Ide, E 2007 *Do libraries matter? On the creation of social capital*

<http://sobek.colorado.edu/~steinmo/LibMatter.pdf>

INVESTING IN AUSTRALIA'S FUTURE THROUGH ITS PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM – WHY, WHO, HOW is available on the Friends of Libraries Australia website **www.fola.org.au**

It has been prepared by four people who are concerned about the need for a better, more accessible, public library system for all in Australia.

They welcome emailed feedback to them collectively or individually on the paper, and in particular ways to improve it.

They are

- **Robert McEntyre** *Director, Robert McEntyre & Associates Pty Ltd*
Robert@mcentyre.com.au
- **Jack Goodman** *CEO, Tutoring Australasia*
jgoodman@yoututor.com.au
- **Daniel Ferguson** *Executive Director, Friends of Libraries Australia*
dferguson@fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au
- **Alan Bundy** *President, Friends of Libraries Australia*
alan.bundy@auslib.com.au

Correspondence about the paper and public library issues may be mailed to

Dr Alan Bundy AM
FOLA President
PO Box 622
Blackwood SA 5051