

PUBLIC LIBRARIES: UNIQUE, UBIQUITOUS, UNDERSOLD, UNDERFUNDED

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Public libraries have a unique cradle to grave clientele and multidimensional educational, literacy, informational, cultural, recreational and community connection roles. With nearly 1600 service points they are now ubiquitous throughout Australia. Despite their already very high usage by 60 per cent of Australians the range of resources, services and programs of the modern public library is often undersold and user expectations of them are too low. For what they already and potentially contribute to individual lives and community well being public libraries remain, at about 7c per Australian per day, poorly funded. Friends of Libraries and other community representatives need to be well informed and constructive advocates for better local public libraries, particularly where a council does not have a library committee with community representation on it.

This paper considers the four Us which apply to public libraries, that they are *unique* and *ubiquitous*, but also *undersold*, and still significantly *underfunded*.

The first U: public libraries are unique

From the Macquarie dictionary, unique means ‘of which there is only one; sole’, or ‘having no like or equal’. It is also noted that there is a less literal and increasingly common usage to mean ‘remarkable, rare, or unusual’. Identified below are some of the ways in which public libraries meet one or more of those definitions. They

- are the only public institution with a cradle to grave clientele
- are free at the point of use, and there is overwhelming public support for this to continue
- have the greatest range of resources, multicultural items, services, spaces and facilities of any public institution
- open – or should open – more days and longer hours than any other local public institution
- are the most heavily used public buildings in their communities
- in aggregation, are by far the largest educational and lifelong learning provider in Australia
- are the most heavily used and valued community provision by local and state governments
- are used by 60% of the population – more people have a library card than any other discretionary card
- have more than 100 million visits a year
- have nearly 400 million loan transactions each year
- are the ultimate environmental recyclers
- are local government’s shop window
- have more Friends groups supporting them than any other institution
- foster community connection and social capital
- have been described in many ways, including: community anchors; community connectors; new village greens; public living rooms; safe places to go; ideas centres; knowledge warehouses; open learning centres; umbrella institutions of the learning society; testbeds of civic values; places lighting up lives; tax dollars hard at work

- at between \$2.50 and \$7 per dollar invested provide a greater return for the community than any other local/state government investment.¹

The title of the New Zealand national strategic framework for public libraries launched in May 2006 comprehends well the mission and scope of the modern public library *Public libraries engage, inspire and inform citizens and help build strong communities*.

The second U: public libraries are ubiquitous

Ubiquity is defined as ‘the state or capacity of being everywhere at the same time’. With nearly 1600 static branches and mobile library services – more than MacDonaldis – public libraries, as the 2006 edition of the *Directory of Australian public libraries*² shows are now ubiquitous throughout the nation. No other independent public institution has such wide accessibility, resource sharing and networks. This is to the extent that a single public library card for use across Australia is conceivable.

This ubiquity was not always so. It has only been a reality since the 1990s. Australia as a whole, particularly in rural and regional areas, was a latecomer to free public libraries, which had their modern conception in the US and UK in the early to middle of the nineteenth century. That about 99% of people in Australia now have some form of access to a free public library service is testimony to the recognition of their value by local and state governments, and the willingness of both – albeit sometimes reluctantly – to invest in them. At critical times library friends, formally constituted and otherwise, have made the difference in convincing governments to invest in public libraries. This need will continue.

A particular achievement has been the provision of public library services in rural and regional Australia through regional libraries; mobile libraries; school/ Tafe/ public joint use libraries; and libraries in small communities colocated with, and as a base for, other services such as council customer centres, health centres, tourist information bureaux, museums, galleries, rural transaction centres, and telecentres.

In his 1946 survey of the neglected state of public libraries in Australia, British librarian Lionel McColvin observed that providing good public library service in rural Australia was the biggest future challenge. In doing so he observed that, as Australia had met very well the challenge of ensuring the availability of beer throughout the country, he was confident the same could be done for books. He was right. Although deficiencies remain in rural library services – such as inadequate buildings, collections, limited professional and other staff, opening hours and technology – Australia has done a better job than in parts of rural USA, for example. The US, with its proliferation of barely viable small independent libraries, is also quite envious of the regional libraries which are such a distinctive feature of the library landscape, particularly here in Victoria.

The third U: public libraries are undersold

A library is one of the very few institutions in society which can never be overused. However a library can be busy, but still underused or difficult to use because of factors such as poor signage, poor location, poor parking and transport access, unattractive and crowded buildings, poor disability access, weak and out of date resources, poor hours, and poor staffing levels. As a recent British report has noted ‘a significant barrier to library use was shabby buildings, whether inside or out’.³

It is well recognised by library staff that library users tend to be too accepting, even stoical, about deficient libraries. In part this is because those library staff typically make great efforts to minimise the impact on users of poor facilities and resources, and are often the most customer focused and helpful staff employed by a council. Even when users are encouraged to complain to council, they

may not do so for fear that their complaint will be seen as a reflection on library staff themselves, not on the provider council. However more public libraries could help themselves by having interactive suggestion board schemes in every branch, as used by all university libraries. User expectation of public libraries is variable and libraries need to engage in an educational process to raise awareness of what the modern public library is now capable of delivering to all citizens, even if at the local level some of that is not yet possible.

Another major factor behind underuse is lack of systematic marketing. If public libraries are used by such a large number of people already, why do they need marketing? One answer is that no assumption can, or should be made, that this level of use will continue – highly desirable though it may be – given the rapidity with which society is changing.

A second answer is that 40% of people do not currently use public libraries, and may not realise what the modern public library can contribute to their quality of life. People who have grown up without access to a free public library such as older Australians; those with limited literacy; people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities; and teenagers, are typically within this 40%. Even in small rural communities it cannot be assumed that everyone will know about the library and what it offers, and that it is free to use. This is especially if the local library is poorly sign posted and identified, as often public libraries are. For example, an unpublished survey of library users and nonusers in a medium sized NSW council area with a central library and several small branches found that many people were completely unaware of the branches, even if there was one in their own suburb. The impression in some communities is that the council is indeed reluctant to make conspicuous and really promote its most valued community provision. Yet there are many anecdotes about the joy which people, including visitors, experience if they are finally introduced to the local public library.

The reasons for undermarketing of public libraries may include lack of strategic vision by a council; lack of strategic vision by a library service; and lack of marketing positions and expertise in a council and its library service. Unfortunately, a reason may be that the library manager and/or library staff are reluctant to market the library service because of fear of being unable to cope with more use and users, and because they know that getting even small additional resources from council will be a major and protracted struggle.

An example of this is to be found in the reporting on homebound library services in the Friends of Libraries Australia 2005 Report to the Nation *Community critical: Australian public libraries serving seniors*.⁴ Numerous libraries reported that they do not promote their service to the homebound because they do not have the resources to cope with more users. Yet Australia has an ageing population, and access to library service is a significant and greatly valued contributor to the quality of life of homebound older Australians.

The fourth U: public libraries are underfunded

In absolute and relative terms it is uncontestable that Australian public libraries overall remain significantly underfunded if the full return on the community's investment in them is to be achieved and sustained. This is the case with public libraries in some other parts of the developed world. Exceptions include Finland and Singapore, two nations which have placed a very high emphasis on becoming 'smart' countries, which they are. Despite the renaissance of the public library worldwide, it is not just Australia which has a way to go in funding its public libraries as a priority – not as a perceived soft option.

The current investment in Australian public libraries is only

- about \$600 million, or 7c per Australian per day, half the now daily cost of the ABC, half the annual cost of just one university, and the annual cost of just one book, cd or dvd. That amount needs to be at least doubled in real terms if public libraries are to achieve their potential for their communities, and anything like equity in their provision is to be achieved across the country.
- that annual cost of public libraries is equivalent to only 1.4% of the total \$40 billion plus expenditure on formal institutional education in Australia.
- for its most heavily used and valued community provision, the investment by local government in its libraries ranges from less than 1% of rates to over 7%. Percentages of annual council outlays are often much less. An issue is that few library managers or community members seem to actually know, or question, what percentage of council rates their library service receives, and what is the historical or other basis for its determination.
- percentages of rates allocated to their libraries or regional library corporations by country councils are generally less, sometimes very much less, than by urban councils. Those councils which are members of regional libraries tend to contribute low rate percentages, as do those country councils who are partners in school based public libraries. They may be getting their libraries 'on the cheap', with almost tokenistic contributions. Whilst regional libraries on the whole make good sense, they may also have disadvantages, as identified in a March 2006 journal article 'Regionalisation in Victorian public libraries'.⁵ These disadvantages include loss of council autonomy, distance from the local community, and particularly lack of ownership, because 'The separate administrative and management structure makes it easier for both tiers of government to deny responsibility, especially financial, for the library service'.⁶
- the public library partnership subsidy by state governments, originally up to 50% of their cost, is now very variable. NSW is by far the worst at about 7%, followed by Victoria at about 14%. The other states range from 22-99%, with Tasmania the highest, as local government only contributes about 1% of the cost of that state's integrated library service.

State governments may excuse the percentage reduction in their contributions to the cost of public libraries by claiming that they have not actually reduced their funding, and that the percentage shift is largely an outcome of councils deciding to increase their funding in response to community need and demand. This is sophistry. The reality is that most state governments provide subsidy to public libraries as though they are unsophisticated, nontechnological book lending agencies of the 1940s and 50s. The subsidy in Victoria, for example, is about a risory 0.1 of 1% of the state's expenditure – this for a community service used by 60% of Victorians, and accessible to all of them. The major impact of effectively reduced state subsidy funding across Australia has been on the lifeblood of public libraries, their collections in all formats.

The outstanding 2005 Victorian report *Libraries/building/communities: the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries*⁷ provides all of the reasons and evidence why much better investment in them is required by Victorian state and local government. A related major research project in NSW *Public libraries and sustainable communities* has now commenced. This aims to 'highlight the contribution public libraries make to a sustainable NSW community and provide a means of quantifying that contribution'.⁸

Increasing the investment

The \$600 million pa required to double Australia's current very modest investment in public libraries is, in national financial terms, insignificant. A country as wealthy as Australia should be doing much better than it is. Ironically, however, the very uniqueness and ubiquity of public libraries which is their greatest distinction and asset, is also their challenge in arguing for better

investment in them. This is because they do not 'fit' neatly within any one level of governmental or bureaucratic responsibility. They tend to be placed in portfolios for the arts and culture, when it is arguable that as the ultimate agency for lifelong learning in all of its manifestations, they should be placed within education, as has sometimes been the case in the past. In that sense, it is little recognised by Australian local government that it is a major player in the educational business, in aggregation being the largest educational provider in the country.

Arguing and sustaining the case for better public libraries has been bedevilled also by Australia's complex three tiers of government, something experienced by public libraries in federal countries such as Germany, the US and Canada. That unique multidimensional educational, informational, literacy, cultural, recreational and social capital cradle to grave remit of the modern public library straddles, at the Australian federal and state levels, more ministerial and departmental portfolios than any other public service. There is an analogy to be made between the ownership conundrum which a regional library of many councils may experience, and the public libraries ownership conundrum across the nation.

At the federal level alone there are at least seven ministerial portfolios on which the work and outcomes of public libraries impact. Within state and territory governments a similar situation applies. Even at the local government level a council's library service will impact on, and connect with, several areas of the increasing responsibilities of councils – for example areas such as information for local small business, early childhood literacy support, and support for older Australians, the homebound, refugees and migrants. This issue of public library ownership is a major challenge in achieving better recognition of what they do and better funding of them. It requires a broadening of whole of government and whole of society understanding of the impact of public libraries on communities, and of the demonstrable return on better investment in them.

That role is being taken nationally by organisations such as the Australian Library and Information Association, Public Libraries Australia, and – as the voice of Friends of Libraries and the 12 million public library users throughout Australia – Friends of Libraries Australia.

However the reality is that advocacy for better public libraries has to be focused on achieving incremental funding improvement at the local level. This is because it is local government which unequivocally has the decision making responsibility for their existence and condition. Except in Tasmania, there has never been a legal requirement (unlike now in the UK) for an Australian council to provide or support a public library service. It is a responsibility which some councils were reluctant to accept, and about which some are still half-hearted. However – despite cost shifting, other financial pressures and expanded responsibilities – more are becoming enthusiastic about their public libraries and building spacious and attractive libraries open 7 days a week as community hubs. Those new buildings are council shop windows, which reflect well on a council's vision and its elected and employed leadership.

There is an ever increasing number – over 200 between 2000 and 2006 – of new and rebuilt public library buildings throughout Australia. Some of these are world class, as shown at the March 2006 first Australian and New Zealand conference on library buildings.⁹ That conference passed a recommendation that a national published audit of the location, size, age and suitability of all public libraries should be conducted, using the methodology of an audit currently underway in NSW. Such an audit would identify many buildings which councils need to be considering for replacement or rebuilding.

The importance of community consultation and the role of Friends of Libraries

In developing new library buildings it is now usual for public forums to be held by councils to consider design and other issues.

However it is still the case that relatively few Australian councils seek or consider library user feedback regularly, or have library committees. Even fewer have any community representatives on those committees. This is anomalous for what is, after all, typically by far a council's most used and valued community service provision.

The fact that the West Gippsland Regional Library Corporation has a community advisory committee is uncommon, commendable, and consistent with the precept of local government as grassroots democracy. It is also good to see support for Friends of Libraries groups within the region. West Gippsland is an exemplar for the rest of Australia.

The role of the increasing number of Friends of Libraries groups, of which there are over 160 in Australia already, must now often include being the informed local advocacy voice of the community about public libraries. If Friends do not accept this role, many councils will have no other way of assessing what the community wishes of its library service. That role can only be at its most constructive if Friends groups are encouraged and supported by council CEOs and library managers.

It also requires that Friends of Libraries and other community members are well informed about the four Us of public libraries, and in particular about their cradle to grave contribution to individual lives and the community which makes them truly unique – and worthy of greater investment.

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During 1988 and again in 2002 Dr Bundy was national president of the Australian Library and Information Association, and in April 1998 was awarded the HCL Anderson Award of the Association, its premier professional award. He became president of Friends of Libraries Australia in 2005, and also in 2005 was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to academic, school and public libraries, and the promotion of better information access by citizens.

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