

REGIONAL AND RURAL LIBRARIES

mass, program synergies, and operational cost savings. There are usually longer opening hours, and increased membership (combined sites entice the non-user), loans, and in-house item usage, such as newspaper reading. There is greater awareness and status of the library, and relationships are formed and expanded. The isolation felt by the often sole rural librarian is overcome, and, if staff are to conduct some of the other services too, then training and practice boost their skills.

The rural community gains improved access to new and existing services, and residents achieve savings in time and fuel by not having to go to other towns for their requirements. This means an economic benefit to the district from tourist and local expenditure, and subsequently industry develops and jobs are created. Lifestyle is enhanced, and ethnicities and demographics are bridged by the shared site enabling diverse people to come together (Hallett & Whitworth, 2006; Itoi, 2006).

The Australian library sector's experience of convergence forms a valuable body of knowledge, and potentially makes it a world leader in the delivery of integrated services. Therefore rural librarians shouldn't be shy: encourage those contemplating convergence, make suggestions, warn of pitfalls, speak at event, and write articles – country know-how can mean city success!

Merged rural libraries are likely to go on, as the nation still faces uncertain financial times, and remains coast-focused in terms of settlement. Their importance cannot be understated because, as Monley (2006) wrote, in small communities co-located facilities represent hopes for growth, development, and a prosperous future.

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On the road with Lance Earney

If you thought being in a library presented challenges for a working career, then consider the often unpredictable times for your library supplier: motel bookings that go astray, floodwaters, road drama, and kangaroos are just some of the challenges that make life more interesting for library supplier Lance Earney. He selects books for libraries from around 34 publishers selling new titles up to three months in advance and travels to metropolitan and regional libraries to do it.

When you do 50 000 kilometres a year, there's bound to be adventure on the road somewhere and for Lance a couple of incidents quickly spring to mind.

"Twice I've had a tyre blow out when going to Condo [Condobolin] on a partly unsealed road. I blew out the front right tyre. I had to take out all the boxes to get the spare tyre, it was just on dark. In the 40 minutes that it took, not another vehicle came past. It is not a common thing now to blow a tyre, but it gave me a fright when it happened."

"Three of us were driving down the Hume Highway to Canberra side by side on three lanes. There were some stones thrown up in front and my windscreen smashed, I was in the middle lane; it

completely crazed the window, chipped a hole. I turned on my indicators and slowly inched across the lanes - I couldn't see anything."

Nature can also play a part in life's adventures. Lance recalls being "caught by floodwaters that came over floorboards at Bathurst, when the river broke its banks, I was the last car through when the police closed the road. I thought I'd be sent back, but I got through just on dark."

Another test of his driving skills is coping with icy roads with a fully loaded vehicle or losing traction. "I now use a 4WD. Some of the staff have vans, but this is convenient to use. When fully loaded, it holds 22 boxes of books and DVDs." Lance's tip is "a good driver is a defensive driver."

Despite these little hiccoughs, Lance says it is a wonderful journey developing lots of personal friendships as he works the job throughout metropolitan and country NSW.

"I enjoy it very much, the people that I work with in libraries – we have a very good working relationship. I've learned a tremendous lot about library management systems and it makes a lot of sense when downloading marc records into their servers in understanding their requests."

"The other thing is that librarians also ring to ask if you are okay if you are running late – and that's nice."

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Tyranny v technology: challenges and opportunities for regional public libraries

As the world's largest island and sixth largest country, with area enough to encase Europe, and outback farms larger than some countries, it is fair to say there is a lot of space in Australia. There are rainforests, deserts, and ski fields, and people who call all these places home. Country public libraries embrace both the challenges and opportunities that come with geographical distance in order to benefit these communities.

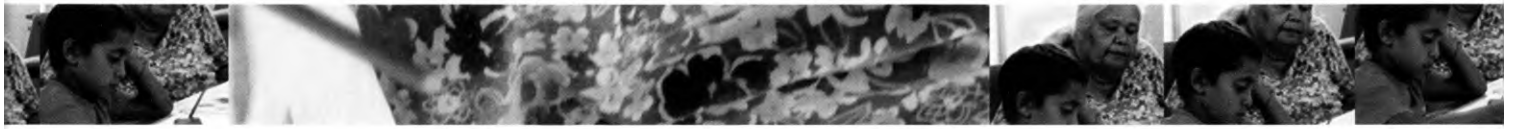
Many librarians agree that part of the challenge is engaging a widespread community. However, Rosalind Dorsman – Technical Services Librarian at Central West Libraries in NSW – suggests that distance is relative. To Gen Y and Gen Z, even a library 'just around the corner' is too far away. Central West Libraries have adapted by developing the library, and now sees more than 60% of students use the library's online schoolwork help from within their homes.

Interestingly, this doesn't show a regional trend as much as a trend for today's students everywhere. Modern online resources that regional libraries offer are on par with young people's preferences and expectations – making public libraries one of the few key resources in regional areas that puts students – city or country – on the same playing field.

In large part due to the proliferation of internet access across the country in the past decade, country libraries are increasingly offering something for everyone and becoming a hub of learning, social occasion, and interaction that reflects the needs of the



Library Supplier Lance Earney presents books for sale during a visit to Central West Libraries in regional NSW



community, even if community members are 300km away (or just around the corner).

Aside from lifestyle preferences of younger generations, there are unavoidable challenges of distance as well. Mount Gambier Public Library in South Australia “provides rural families with the opportunity to access quality learning tools which would not normally be available to them.” Library Manager Cathryn Harris adds, “Mount Gambier also has a high number of home-schooled children and library online resources are heavily used by these families.” Mid-Western Regional Council Library in NSW similarly offers “opportunities to the community equivalent to those available in large urban areas.” Library Services Coordinator Eilagh Rurenga adds that the library’s services encourage families’ and student’s engagement irrespective of socio-economic status, location, or education level.

Similarly, while there are families more than able to pay for educational services, the resources are simply not available – this is where the regional public library makes a real difference, explains Dora Adeline, Youth Services Librarian at Albany Public Library in Western Australia.

While inequity is inevitable – wherever you live – public libraries aim to remove some of the obstacles. With the introduction of the National Broadband Network, country public libraries will be in even better positions to deliver services further, more efficiently, and more equitably. As their scope of services and ability to deliver resources increases, country libraries can’t help but be noticed as an undeniably vital part of regional and isolated communities.



Systems Services Supervisor, Ian Cowan, helps a student with e-learning at Cairns Regional Council Library Services.

But with diminishing public library budgets in every state and for public national institutions, how can regional public libraries achieve these potential opportunities?

The next step for country libraries

Does your library have a partnership in the community? Mount Gambier Public Library in South Australia does. Gambier City Pharmacies sponsored \$10 000 toward the library’s community health programs. Likewise, NSW North Coast Libraries are supported by credit union BCU and by Griffith University, both sponsoring the libraries’ online school support resource, yourtutor, for local families.

Similarly, public libraries in Queensland are sponsored by CQ University and Queensland University of Technology, supporting state-wide use of online academic advice service in partnership with the Queensland State Library.

For local businesses, there is strong interest in giving back to the community, giving young people skills, and offering something to the future of the local area. There may be greater motivation to support, up-skill, and educate local students who will one day be business leaders, the local workforce, and consumers.

However, universities in particular are realising the value of regional libraries. Why? Following the Federal Government’s decision to link a university’s funding to its number of regional and low socio-economic enrolments, institutions across the country are forming alliances with public libraries to reach out

to pre-university, high school and primary school students.

The partnerships make good sense. University-bound students are currently in school. They are library card holders. They do their homework. They might not be thinking about university just yet, but they form impressions during their school years. The enrolment outcomes are potentially huge, for a university logo, links, and information to appear in conjunction with key library services. As a means to stay in contact with young locals, universities are realising the value of regional libraries.

Cortney Sivewright, E-services librarian at Geraldton-Greenough Regional Library in WA says simply, “there is equal access for everyone, no matter their physical location or socio-economic background.” This is the attractive point for universities, who need ways to speak to the next generation of tertiary students, no matter where they come from.

While the partnerships are not entered into lightly, library-university partnerships have practical, careful reasoning behind them and so far seem to have proved mutually successful for regional libraries, the community, and the universities.

Regional public libraries are valuable, unique community hubs, perhaps wearing more hats than their city counterparts, and supporting invaluable human capital – today’s students, tomorrow’s leaders. The quality of regional libraries varies greatly from town to town, but by starting local conversations about the library’s benefits, the potential is in each one to become an increasingly valuable community partner.

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Meeting the challenges in information service provision for rural health professionals

The Far West Health Library is physically located in the Sydney University Department of Rural Health on the Broken Hill Hospital Campus in far western New South Wales. The library is one of five small libraries (1.4 FTE staff or less) which provide service within the Greater Western Area Health Service (GWAHS). The Health Service covers a rural area of 444 900 sq km or 55.52% of the state of New South Wales. This is a region more than twice the size of the entire British Isles and more than six times the size of Tasmania. There are 113 health care facilities (52 hospitals and 61 community health centres) spread throughout this vast region.

The Far West Health Library is one of a number of rural health libraries around Australia which support either rural clinical schools or university departments of rural health. University involvement is vital in many rural health libraries, as the university presence often provides invaluable support in matters of staffing, budget, and access to services.

The library also provides support to the Broken Hill Centre for Remote Health Research and the newly formed Centre for Remote Health. Other clients include the Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation (which delivers primary health care to several towns in Western NSW), the Royal Flying Doctor Service, and the Poche Centre for Indigenous Health.

As the only medical library for over 1200 km in an arc between Adelaide and Dubbo, the library also provides services to a wide range of health professionals and students who work in far western NSW. Many health service staff in remote locations are upgrading their qualifications as distance students of a number of tertiary institutions and professional bodies.