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.

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

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

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.

Sydney University Department of Rural Health conducts clinical placements for students from over 20 Australian universities. Over a dozen different disciplines are represented in the student program (including dentistry, veterinary science, ambulance paramedics, pharmacy, medicine, nursing, allied health, and aboriginal health workers).

The diversity of the library clientele is reflected in the special collection strengths in aboriginal health and culture, rural and remote health issues, research methods, and local history, which supplement the small medical collection.

The main challenge in this isolated environment is effectively servicing the many remote users throughout the area. By mid 2007, only one of the five GWAHS libraries had a web catalogue, and the well-documented budgetary problems of the health service precluded any efforts to convert the five existing library systems into a common web interface. However, by employing the Open Source software, Koha, the five libraries managed to combine and produce a web site and catalogue (**http://gwahsopac.intersearch.com.au**) accessible to all users, at a fraction of their former costs.

Further use of web 2.0 tools has enabled the highly successful GWAHS Libraries Blog (**http://www.gwahslibrariesblog.blogspot.com**) now with over 650 postings of resources of interest to rural health professionals, and under development is a delicious page.

The use of information technology applications to overcome the 'tyranny of distance' felt by many of the library's clients, is undoubtedly the way of the future. However, rural inequalities in internet provision provide a constant challenge to librarians, educators, students, and many others. Issues with aging computer hardware, low bandwidth, slow internet times, obtaining servicing, and inadequate server capacity are, unfortunately, all too common.

With web access which is well short of city standards, rural staff often struggle with IT literacy, and any online training is often inhibited by the infrastructure.

The National Broadband Strategy brings with it a promise of better things, and a reduction in the IT inequalities of rural Australia. It is never more needed than now. Bring it on!

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Wagga Wagga on the web

There are many advantages to living in the country: a relaxed lifestyle, no traffic, friendly people, and a good sense of community. With these benefits, of course, come significant issues that we won't call disadvantages, but rather challenges that face communities and their libraries. Rural and regional communities are spread out over large areas and many in the community are isolated. Access to library buildings, and therefore collections, can be limited due to distance and, in many cases, restrictive opening hours. Web 2.0 technologies enable rural and regional libraries to take their collections to the community and are especially applicable to collections that are difficult to access, such as local history collections.

Libraries' local history collections hold material that is of particular significance to the communities they serve. They are the repository for the community's story and yet they are, necessarily, the most difficult to access. Much of the material held is old, fragile, and rare, therefore given restricted access in order to preserve it. Rural and regional libraries often do not have full-time Local Studies Librarians so the collections are