

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into the progress and future direction of life-long learning

Submission no: 8

Received: 10/06/2004

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The Secretary,
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education References Committee
Suite SG.52, Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



9th June, 2004

Dear Sir/Madam,

On behalf of the Great Lakes Library Service I wish to bring to the attention of the Committee the import role that public libraries play in the lifelong learning process. In essence these matters run the full gamut of the terms of reference of the inquiry.

As a background the Great Lakes Library Service covers the Great Lakes LGA and has a resident population of over 32,000 people. The library service has very high memberships rates, in the order of 19,700 members, or 60% of the population.

Impact of Lifelong Learning on Traditional Library Services

The role of public libraries in lifelong learning is regularly overlooked, which is surprising considering the similarities between those involved in lifelong learning and library patrons.

In Great Lakes, the local government area with highest median age in NSW, 25% of the population is aged 65 or more and 26% of library patrons are in this same age category. And though detailed borrowing levels by age are not available, it is clear that this age group are very activity users of the library. It is no coincidence that library stock at Great Lakes has the highest lending rate in NSW.

One of the most important demographic groups involved in lifelong learning are retirees with available time to devote to further education and understanding. The blossoming of such groups as the University of the Third Age (U3A) is testament to this.

And to this mix the fact that the population is aging, and we have a situation where a very activity group of library users is getting larger and seeking wisdom. It is not a great step to take to realize that the lifelong learning process will impact generally on libraries.

The Role of Technology in the Lifelong Learning Process

A brief article in the January 2003 edition of the magazine Internet.au refers to the fact that though seniors have the fastest uptake of the Internet they had significant barriers in doing so, key amongst these being *“lack of access to appropriate training.”*

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The truth of this fact has been profoundly felt by the Great Lakes Library Service as it is has such a high representation of seniors in its community. As the library expanded its Internet access several years ago constant requests were received for help in using the Internet. This phenomenon bears some reflection. Patrons of the library do not ask for assistance in reading before borrowing a book and yet they are quite prepared to ask for aid in surfing the web.

As a result of this pressure for assistance the library worked with the Friends of the Great Lakes Library Service (FOGLLS) to lodge an application to the Department of Aging, Disability and Home Care (DADHC) to run a series of training courses on the Internet and IT for seniors. This was part of the DADHC's Seniors and IT Grant Programme. The application was successful and the course was run for around 15 months, from late 2002 to the end of 2003. It involved short courses in different levels of Internet and IT expertise and proved remarkably popular. Around 700 seniors participated over the 15-month period, and all courses were fully booked.

This training was also supported by the presence of an Internet assistant who was available in the library each morning for two hours to help people on a one-to-one basis.

This was one of the most successful undertakings the library has been involved with in recent years and clearly demonstrated a need for training in the technology and the Internet.

It is essential that all levels of government understand what an important role the library plays in the lifelong learning experience, and that increasingly this involves a technological training aspect.

The library is a public forum, it places no expectations on people and delivers no judgment. It is a zone of comfort, it is a zone that the elderly patronize heavily and it is a gateway to knowledge for all. And now it provides the technology to surf the web. There could hardly be a more likely candidate for playing a role in the lifelong learning process. They represent an established system that works remarkably well and is ubiquitous in communities across Australia. If the Federal Government ever wanted to play a wide-reaching role in lifelong learning public libraries present them with the ideal opportunity.

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