# Public libraries and university are partners

Bill Linklater *(University of Newcastle)*, Veronica Lunn *(Lake Macquarie)* and Chris Williams *(Newcastle Region)* are launching a cooperative activity with major regional and cross-sectoral implications

The Auchmuty Library of the University of Newcastle, Lake Macquarie City Library, and the Newcastle Public Library have established a partnership to pilot a project which aims to enhance community access to information in the Hunter Region.

Lake Macquarie City and Newcastle Libraries jointly lend in excess of three and a half million items per annum and are currently the two busiest public libraries in NSW. The University of Newcastle Libraries network draws heavily on students from both areas, and have cooperation with local public libraries over the years. They have streamlined access to resources, mounted joint training sessions and facilitated information exchange sessions. There have also been staff exchanges between University and public library staff, and the University has provided a more informal focus for cooperation through the hosting of professional meetings on campus.

The partners initially discussed options for enhanced cooperation in 1993 and agreed that the wider community could significantly benefit from access to a Hunter Community information database and access to a wide range of databases through the Internet. They launched a pilot project in early 1994, aiming to:
- provide remote inquirers and researchers with direct electronic access to Hunter-focused database developed by each of the three libraries;
- provide a foundation to develop a community wide electronic information network for Hunter Region residents and industry;
- broaden public access to Internet via local public libraries;
- provide a window for the libraries to explore and evaluate overseas electronic community information networks;
- enhance technical and searching skills for public library staff through information exchange.

The pilot coincided with technology upgrades at each of the libraries, and the availability of space on a Unix computer (CPU) at the Auchmuty Library. The access by the public libraries will initially be through dial-up modem to the University Library's CPU into the campus wide network. It is envisaged that telecommunications will be upgraded after the traffic and scope of usage has been properly monitored.

Lake Macquarie and Newcastle Region Public Libraries have contributed locally developed databases, and are committed to making other electronic information available pertaining to the respective local government areas. Databases currently loaded include the Newcastle Earthquake database, developed by Newcastle Public Library, and the Lake Macquarie Local History database (structured in the format of the Hunter Photobank). These databases are hosted and accessible via the University Library's CPU through a structured series of menus.

It is proposed to add further databases during 1994. These include:
- Index to the Hunter Photo Bank (Newcastle Region Public Library);
- Council Business Papers for current sessions and for past two years (Lake Macquarie City Library);
- council Business Papers (Newcastle Region Public Library);
- Community Directories (Newcastle and Lake Macquarie Libraries);
- Council Reports and documents - particularly environmental reports on lead levels and monitoring of Lake quality (Lake Macquarie City Library).

Lake Macquarie City received an innovation award from the Institute of Municipal Management in 1993 for the Local Government Imaging Pilot. The availability of imaging facilities in-house will facilitate electronic transfer of information that has traditionally been accessible only within the corporate body. This wider provision of community information accords with the principles of democratisation of access, particularly as regards sensitive issues in the community including development and environmental concerns.

The databases are accessed under the University's Campus Wide Information System which the staff in the Auchmuty Library played a major role in implementing. A menu heading, *Hunter Community Information* accesses the databases currently loaded. Training of selected public library staff was provided by the University and took place in March, at which time accounts were established providing access to the University Campus Wide Information System. This electronic mail link also enhanced the communication links between the three libraries.

Additionally, training on the Internet was provided to the public library staff at both the University of Newcastle and through the State Library of NSW in March, and staff have been able to refine their skills through close contact with the University staff. The Internet is currently being accessed at the staff level only, and further investigation will more clearly define procedures to be adopted.

The project has generated significant interest and has provided for closer links between the three libraries at several levels. We regard it as an exciting opportunity for regional and cross-sectoral cooperation, and the partners are committed to the further development of the project and to the principle of information sharing in the wider community.                    ■

*Photo: Chris Williams*