It's official: Australians love libraries ...but image problems persist

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New statistics released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reveal that a very high proportion (95.4 per cent) of the population rated libraries as respondents thought that libraries should receive some government funding compared with art galleries (57.2 per cent) and orchestras (54.2 per cent). This support was with our knowledge of broad community use of libraries. We also know that libraries are perceived as important resources that support formal education, recreation and

Perceived importance of cultural venues in person's community
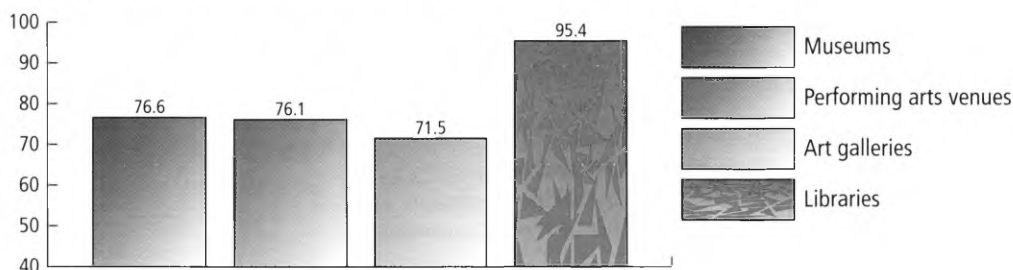
very important or important in their communities. Compared with other cultural venues (museums, 76.6 per cent; performing arts venues, 76.1 per cent; and art galleries, 71.5 per cent) libraries rated very highly (see graph 'Perceived importance of cultural venues in person's community').

This study confirms the findings of a number of previous surveys which have demonstrated strong community support for libraries. The interesting feature of this new survey is that respondents strongly supported government funding for libraries. More than ninety per cent of

strong across all states and territories irrespective of the gender of the respondents, their age group and their level of education.

The authors of the report remind us to take care when interpreting attitudinal data but it is interesting to compare the level of education and support for different types of cultural activity. Persons with a bachelor or higher degree were more likely to respond positively to government support for live theatre, art galleries and orchestras. Support for libraries was consistent across all levels of educational attainment. This is consistent

personal information-gathering (such as health, genealogy) pursuits (see graph 'Support for government funding of the arts, educational level').

Support for libraries was strong among users and non-users compared with other cultural venues. This finding is also consistent with the findings of earlier studies. In this study 92.0 per cent of persons who had not attended a library in the previous twelve months rated libraries as very important or important compared with art galleries (65.0 per cent), performing arts venues (67.0 per cent) and museums (74.0 per cent). For those who had attended one of these venues in the last twelve months support for libraries was 99.7 per cent following by art galleries (91.1 per cent), performing arts (84.6 per cent) and museums (91.1 per cent) (see graph, 'Cultural venues perceived as very important important, person's attendance').

The survey is important for many reasons principally because its reliability is based on a household survey of approximately 3000 households throughout Australia. The resources and sampling methodology of the ABS guarantee that this is the most reliable ▶

### Support for government funding of the arts, educational level
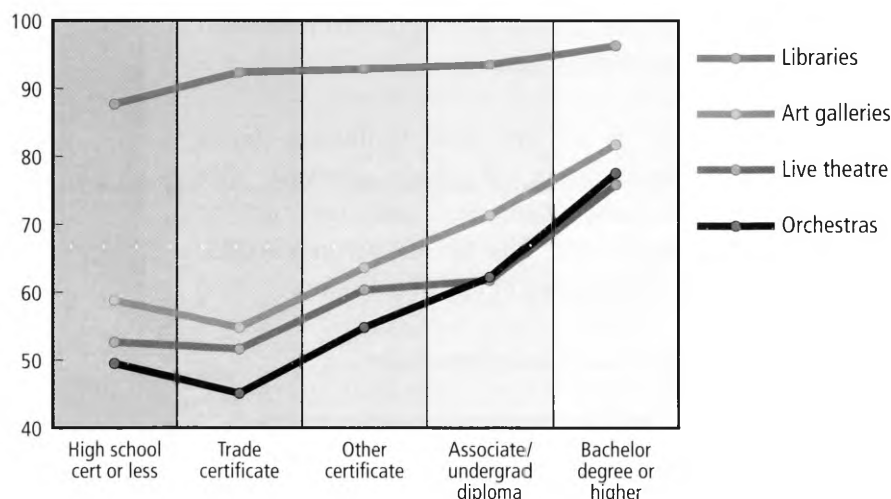
► data that has been available to date. Interestingly, the results are not unexpected.

We already know that libraries have popular support. The senior politicians who responded to our most recent request for comments on libraries all provided eloquent commentary [http://www.alia.org.au/advocacy]. A survey of newspaper clippings during Australian Library Week this year in May conducted by ALIA National Office also revealed strong positive images of libraries within their communities. The study conducted for the Cultural Ministers' Council in 1995 (Mercer, Colin; *Navigating the economy of knowledge*, Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, Griffith University, March 1995) showed support among users and non-users and listed a range of areas where libraries are performing well (in addition to identifying some areas for improvement). But what do we know about the image of the people who work in libraries?

In surveys of the status of professions and trades, librarians rate about the same prestige as the professions of teachers and public servants — well above journalists and politicians but below doctors and lawyers. This too is not unexpected — nor is it necessarily a negative image for the profession (though some within the profession choose to make such an interpretation).

Work commissioned by the ALIA ACT and NSW Branches in 1997 on the image of the profession (see boxes over page) suggests that the self-image of the profession is low with a tendency to fo-

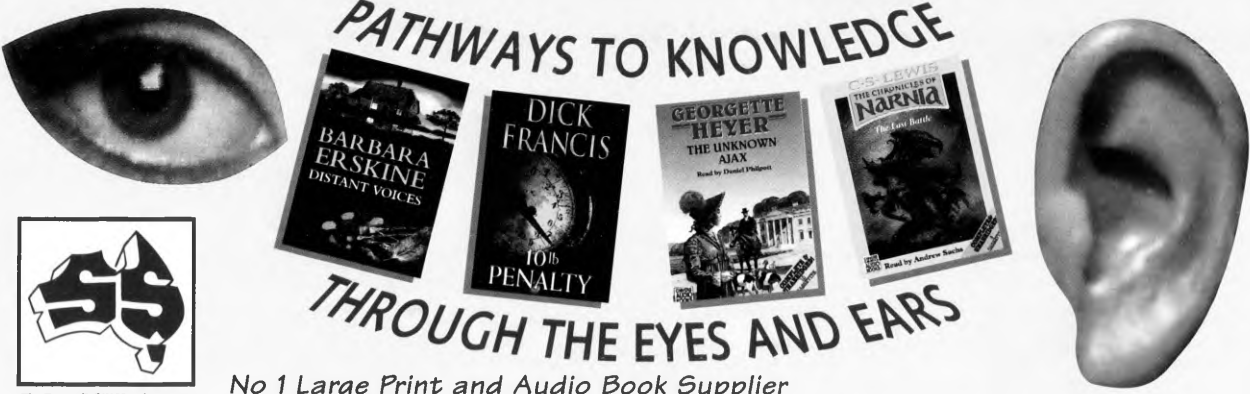**Cultural venues perceived as very important or important, person's attendance**
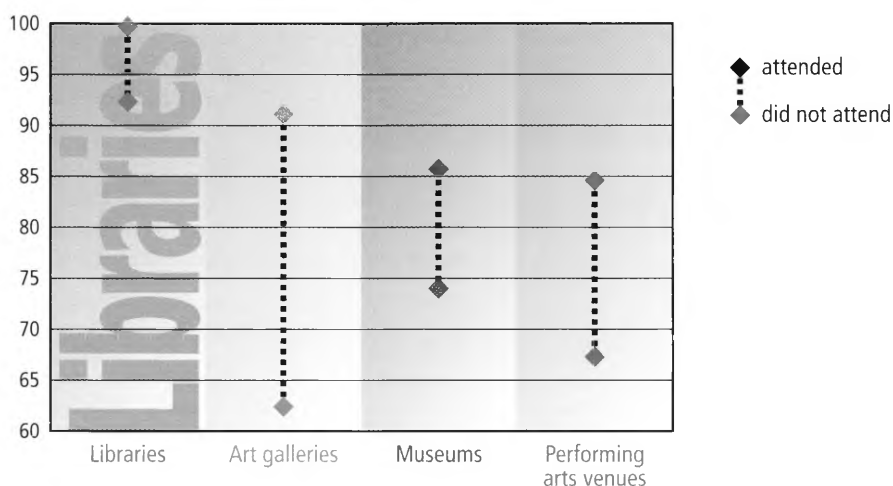
cus on stereotypes promoted in literature and film. We know that the profession has certain characteristics, such that it is composed of mainly women aged over forty, but stereotypes are less damaging than caricature — and we see little of that. In fact the skills, aptitudes and personalities within the profession are refreshingly diverse and we all should do more to project this pluralism to the wider community.
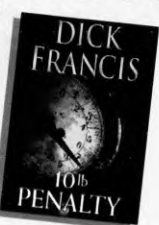
Sometimes there is a reluctance within the profession to recognise excellence within its own ranks. Outstanding professionals operate at every level within our public and corporate libraries — in schools, banks, universities, law firms and local government libraries. Some recognition is provided through ALIA awards and, on a national scale, through the Australian honours system and privately sponsored programs such

as the Business Woman of the Year (won by Alison Crook in 1992). Outstanding librarians have been recognised in all these spheres. During 1998 two librarians have been featured on page 1 of the Saturday employment section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the 'Career path' column. Dagmar Schmidmaier, New South Wales state librarian and Helen Jarvis, head of school, Information, Library and Archives Studies, University of New South Wales have each projected images of professional high-achievers with interesting careers and positions of responsibility. Similarly a number of impressive profiles of Victorian state librarian Fran Awcock have recently appeared in prominent positions in Melbourne papers. These are positive images and it would be good to see more of them.

Librarians: a poor self-image

Librarians appear to have a very low self-image which has endured historically over time and across cultural boundaries. This is documented in a number of articles in the bibliography; for example, Fleck and Bawden (1995); Mandle (1991); Leary (1992). It is a notion also strongly represented in the reflective and anecdotal literature with the portrayal of librarians who see themselves as undervalued, not recognised and not appreciated. The limited research, however, provides a contrary picture.

Fleck and Bawden (1995) suggest that essentially the problem of image is a problem of self-esteem and concluded that the librarians in their study were positive and proud, even though they acknowledged that 'we are our own worst enemies', generally passive, complacent, and not flexible and adaptable (1995:222). Interestingly enough in the non-research literature where librarians voice their expressions of being undervalued and under appreciated, or being portrayed as the historical stereotype, there is almost no reference to any of the research that exists that presents a counter (and positive) voice. Mandle (1991: 115) highlights this: 'librarians do seem to have gone particularly out of their way to convey a self-defeating image, to discourage what they are there for, to be restrictive and difficult'. One is left to wonder if librarians do not want to have a positive image.

Todd, Ross J and Houghton, Jan; Secondary research on perceptions of library workers and libraries, ALIA consultancy report; Department of Information Studies, University of Technology, Sydney, October 1997, pp7–8

If we concede that there is overwhelming community and political support for libraries in the public sector, a similar level of support within the corporate sector (See ALIA's survey of Australia's top-100 companies, http://www.alia.org.au/survey100/), a plethora of professional skills and aptitudes and some positive projections for the future of the profession, what remains to be done? Why does the image of the profession continue to be an issue of such concern to those working in our libraries? The answer is, in part, that the rhetoric of endorsement is largely unsupported by the financial resources required to adequately fund services and, similarly, to fund salaries. The commencement salaries of librarians with post-graduate professional entry-level qualifications are the lowest of any profession. This trend continues through many of the professional ranks. Young people today, in a period of high unemployment, make career choices based on employability and potential earnings as well as a perception of the value, utility and excitement of the work (see article p12, 'Image of the profession: School leavers attitudes towards careers in librarianship', by Neil Greeve).

Librarians: creative, innovative and technologically skilled

The Task Force of image set up by the Public Relations Committee of the United States Special Library Association, undertook a study to investigate self-perceptions, perceptions of jobs of librarians and information professionals, and personal characteristics attributed to librarians. In this study, librarians expressed positive views of themselves, satisfaction with their positions, and overwhelmingly felt that they have highly developed skills that are important to their employer. Many in fact felt that the profession had enhanced their self-esteem, and that the profession had enabled them to fulfil their professional expectations. They overwhelmingly agreed that they are creative, innovative and technologically skilled. The study also showed, contrary to much of the reflective and anecdotal literature on image, that librarians agreed that the work of the library/information professional is valued by society. There was a mixed response in the area of personal characteristics, however. The study revealed that fifty per cent feared change, fifty-three per cent agreed that they lacked confidence; and only thirty-four per cent felt that they were highly regarded by their employers.

Todd, Ross J and Houghton, Jan; Secondary research on perceptions of library workers and libraries, ALIA consultancy report; Department of Information Studies, University of Technology, Sydney, October 1997, p9

The task of repositioning library professionals to project a strong positive image, to attract the financial resources needed to support the high skill levels demanded of today's professionals and to attract the best and the brightest to pursue a career within libraries and information centres is not easy. But it is not impossible either and perhaps the best place to start is to acknowledge that a preoccupation with stereotypes is not a good place to commence the journey. ■