

Library service wins national award

Wimmera Regional Library Service recognised for providing outstanding service

On 29 November last, Senator Ian MacDonald, Minister for Regional Services, Territories and Local Government, presented Russ Elwin, the CEO/Regional Librarian of the Wimmera Regional Library with a prestigious national award for Innovation in Local Government. The library service was a category winner in the area of Information Technology and Organisational Practices, (Rural Award). His award was for a research project into the development of Wimmera's mobile library to provide other non-traditional services to its isolated and remote population.

The Wimmera Regional Library serves the most isolated people in rural Victoria, over six local government authorities in the north-western and western parts of the state. This is an area of almost 40 000 square kilometres, with a population of 52 000. The Library has twelve branches and a mobile library that serves forty sites. Online technology, in the form of the internet, has proved a boon and Wimmera's mobile library was one of the first in Australia to provide internet access to its users.

As an extension of that, the Victorian State Government, via the Public Libraries Division of the Department of Infrastructure, assisted the Wimmera Regional Library by funding a research project carried out by RMIT, to see if a

convergence of services was a feasible option using the internet. This project was completed in August 1999 and the findings reported that it was both a feasible and viable option and what was more, a world-first.

As the Minister said at the award ceremony, 'there were 338 entries across the eight categories, (the most ever, in its twelve-year history) of which thirty-four came from rural councils, demonstrating the capacities and determination of rural communities in addressing the issues facing small towns in regional Australia. The quality of the entries was very high.' The Wimmera Regional Library was the only library service in Australia that reached the level of a category winner.

The library now aims to form a



Russ Elwin accepts the award from Senator MacDonald

consortium of stakeholders and obtain external funding to develop these findings further. Much remains to be done, particularly in extending these services to the isolated and remote users the library has to serve. However, research has demonstrated it is possible, and with the exciting developments in information technology, especially satellite technology, this possibility becomes more of a reality every day.

Russ strongly believes that while the Wimmera Regional Library has proved itself an innovator, most libraries are innovative services, necessity having made them so. He would like to see more public libraries entering these prestigious national awards, to heighten awareness of how libraries are adapting to the challenges they face, in spite of their ever-decreasing budgets. ■



The winning mobile library on the road