

'Librarians are sweet and helpful, but the libraries are run-down and decrepit...'

While most of us would agree with the 'sweet and helpful' part of this quote, we would probably be very uncomfortable with the 'run-down and decrepit' part. The comment was made by one of the respondents to a major, nation-wide survey of the experience researchers have accessing books to support their work. The survey report, *Looking for books: a report on access to research monographs by academics and higher-degree researchers at Australian university libraries*, commissioned by the National Library's Australian Library Collections Task Force, was written by Professor Leon Cantrell from the University of Western Sydney, who is a member of the Task Force.

Academics and researchers from the departments of English and Psychology (or equivalent), at all Australian universities were surveyed to determine how well their library's monograph collection met their research needs, and the nature of any problems they experienced. Responses to the survey were received from over 270 academics throughout Australia, providing a very comprehensive set of views.

Approximately fifty per cent of respondents indicated that their university library's monograph collection was insufficient to support higher than undergraduate research. Those academics working in new or highly-specialised fields, or who were located at newer and regional universities, experienced additional difficulties. This brings into question the current ability of some academic libraries to support the wide range of subjects pursued at their institutions. In the forward to the report, the director-general of the National Library, Ian Fullerton wrote:

'The results of the survey provide hard evidence to support what many know — that despite the best effort of libraries, researchers at a range of Australian universities experience considerable difficulties accessing sufficient materials in their specific subject areas to support advanced research. These conclusions are consistent with one of the themes of the Government's recent Green Paper, New knowledge, new opportunities, and is discussed in this report by Professor Cantrell.'

The results of the survey also provide specific information about the services that

libraries provide. It is clear that inter-library loans are very important in ensuring that researchers can access the material they need. Over thirty-five per cent of English and twenty-two per cent of Psychology researchers use inter-library loans more than six times per year to access books in Australia. Use of overseas inter-library loans appears to be minor, however, with many respondents reporting zero usage. While over twenty-six per cent of English and seventeen per cent of Psychology researchers reported that they had no problems with inter-library loan services, a number of problems were raised by other respondents. Apart from cost and speed of delivery, respondents cited too short loan periods, insufficient information about the status of inter-library loan requests and insufficient information about the contents of books being ordered.

The survey found that academics, and other researchers, expected that problems relating to access to books would be addressed through electronic means.

Suggestions to improve access to monographs included:

- electronic access to information about books held by Australian libraries;
- user-initiated interlibrary loans; and
- online access to tables of contents and to the contents of books themselves.

Looking for books provides the first Australia-wide overview of the experiences of a sample of users accessing monographs. Professor Cantrell's work in this area is a good example of how co-operation between academics and librarians can be a powerful mechanism to improve library access to research materials. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for the academic and library communities: it is clear that both communities must share the solutions to the issues raised in this report.

Copies of the report are available from the National Library of Australia, and comments on the findings can be directed either to Professor Cantrell at the University of Western Sydney on 02 9772 6600 or Paula Williams at the National Library of Australia on 02 6262 1481 [pwilliams@nla.gov.au]. Additional information about the work of the Australian Library Collections Task Force is available from the NLA website: <http://www.nla.gov.au/niac/auscoll/>. ■



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