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*Suitable for Libraries

99 400 000 visits to public libraries

Australia's 505 local government and eight national and state library organisations attracted 99.4 million visits in 1999–2000, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics new publication *Public Libraries, Australia, 1999–2000*. This is more than 3.5 times the 27.5 million visits made to Australia's 2049 museums, galleries and historic properties in the same period. (*Museums, Australia, 1999–2000*).

Hard facts — worth noticing

The visits to local government, national and state libraries increased by eleven per cent since 1996–97. Considered separately, the visits to the 1510 local government library locations increased ten per cent to 93.3 million, and the visits to national and state library locations increased by twenty-five per cent to 6.1 million. Visits to museums, galleries and historic properties doubled. Visits to the search rooms of the eight national and state archives operating in Australia, also covered in the *Public Libraries, Australia, 1999–2000* report, increased by one per cent to 94 200. National and state libraries undertook archival services also as a secondary activity, attracting 342 700 visits to search rooms.

In the year to June 2000, local government, national and state libraries attracted 5.2 visits per head of population. Considered separately, local government libraries received 4.9 visits per head of population, and national and state libraries one visit per three heads of population. Museums, galleries and historic properties attracted 1.4 visits per head of population.

Local government libraries have increased their holdings by three per cent since June 1997, reaching a total of 39.4 million books and other materials. Of these, 36.4 million were available as lending stock. Each item was borrowed on average 4.5 times in the year. The National and state libraries increased their holdings by five per cent and together held 14.9 million books and other library materials for non-lending purposes. The ABS does not report on interlibrary loans made from the collections.

At the end of June 2000, more than half of the population (10.7 million people) had registered as borrowers of local government libraries. On average, each registered borrower visited these

libraries nine times, and borrowed fifteen items. Every visit resulted in 1.7 loans.

Local government libraries spent a total of \$91.5 million on the acquisition of library materials and \$1.2 million on online subscription payments. National and state libraries spent \$31.5 million on acquisitions and \$1.0 million on online subscriptions.

There are, of course, many reasons to visit a library other than borrowing books. By the end of June 2000, Australia's public libraries had 3000 internet workstations. A 242 per cent increase since 1996–97 brought the number of internet workstations in local government libraries up to 2832. This is an average of 1.9 internet workstation per local government library location. National and state libraries contained a further 173 internet workstations. It is not clear how many of the internet workstations were available for public use, or how much they were being used to access electronic information resources.

The best indication of internet usage in public libraries comes from the ABS report *Use of the internet by householders, Australia, November 2000*. It shows that six per cent of all adults in Australia accessed the internet in libraries in 2000 — this is equivalent to 828 000 people. All in all, half of the adults in Australia, or 6.9 million adults, accessed the internet in that period.

In June 2000, 236 local government organisations had a home page, and 75 made their catalogues available on their websites — equivalent to 14.9 per cent.

It is no surprise that public libraries rely on government funding for their operations. In 1999–2000, public libraries received \$725 million in government funding — or \$38 per head of population. This equates to ninety-one per cent of their income.

Considered separately, local government libraries sourced ninety-five per cent of their income, or \$455.7 million, from government funding [three quarters derived from local governments]. This equates to \$24 in government funding per head of population. National and state libraries sourced eighty-four per cent of their income, or \$190.9 million from government funding [one fifth federal and four fifth state

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► and territory government]. That equates to \$10 per head of population in government funding. National and state archives sourced ninety per cent of their income, or \$78.2 million, million from government funding. This equates to \$4 per head of population.

Labour costs decreased since 1996–97 as a percentage of the total expense, but the actual expenditure on salaries and wages increased — by sixteen per cent in local government libraries and twenty per cent in national and state libraries. The labour costs component decreased from fifty-seven per cent in 1996–97, to fifty-three per cent of the total expense of local government libraries. The labour cost component of the total expenditure in the national and state libraries decreased from forty-five per cent in 1996–97, to thirty-eight per cent in 1999–2000.

The 505 local government libraries employed 9592 people at the end of June 2000. Of these thirty-nine per cent held qualifications as either librarians (2422) or library technicians (1313). The eight national and state libraries employed 2248 people. Of these fifty-one per cent held qualifications as librarians (713) or library technicians (434). Females represented eighty-seven per cent of all employed in local government libraries, which is significantly

higher than the sixty-eight per cent recorded in national and state libraries.

Stats, more stats...

There is nothing like hard facts! These public libraries statistics truly dispel the myth that public libraries are becoming less relevant as personal access to the internet increases from homes and workplaces throughout the country. In fact, they show that the opposite is the case: there have been major increases in visits, reasonable increases in the stock of library materials, major increases in technology facilities for library staff and clients, increases in government funding (especially to national and state libraries), and increases in the number of staff employed in libraries.

The statistics also show a small decline in the number of staff with librarian and library technician qualifications in national and state libraries, and decreases in the proportion of these staff relative to total staffing. This is opposite the trend in national and state archives where the number and relative proportion of librarians or archivists increased.

Libraries play an important role in the community for providing information resources and assistance by information specialists. They are also providing conveniently located internet

access and training to those who do not have access from home or work. We know that last year, publicly accessible libraries had nearly 3000 internet access points. A shame we really do not know how many of these are available for the public, how much they are being used by the public to access online information resources and services, and how many users are being educated by libraries in accessing and evaluating online information resources.

The lack of reliable, up-to-date information about public internet access and use in libraries is a matter of concern, not just for us in the profession but also for government and developers of public policy. ALIA has raised these issues with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and we hope that the next set of public libraries statistics will include more detail. We have also discussed it with the National Office of the Information Economy, and highlighted how useful it would be to have data available for comparisons and benchmarking. ALIA will continue to pursue the issue.

For now, however, we can celebrate the results of the ABS census of public libraries — backbones as these great organisations are for lifelong learning in a knowledge society and economy. ■

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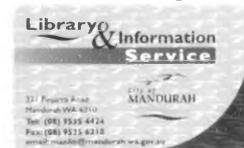
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