



In an article published last year, ELLEN O'HEHIR and SUE REYNOLDS collected the findings and predictions of a number of pundits about what the future holds for libraries. They tell us here about the five dominant themes of their meta-analysis.

The future of books and of libraries has been much discussed via many public platforms where opinions can be aired: blogs, newspaper and magazine articles, and radio and television programs. Peer-reviewed research papers based on empirical evidence have also been published in academic journals. One of these, 'Highways and byways: future directions for Australian public libraries' by Ellen O'Hehir and Sue Reynolds and published in *Australian Library Journal* in 2015*, examined a range of published documents – crystal balls, if you will – that considered the future of public libraries and analysed their forecasts. The analysis revealed a number of themes and trends that the authors of each report thought most likely to occur in the future. The reports – which included predictions out to 2030 – were published between 2009 and 2015, and ALIA's findings in *Future of the LIS profession: Public libraries* 2014, (see bit.ly/29N2XSo) were included among them.

Community was the most dominant theme, and libraries were mentioned as a third place (a term used in community building, in which home is the first place and work is the second place), a safe space and hub for community engagement and outreach, and as a means for face-to-face social networking. **Creativity** was the

second-most prominent theme; libraries were described as innovative technological centres for collaboration, delivery of content, and knowledge creation with the input of non-library staff who have expertise, including the general public.

Third on the list was the topic of **financial issues**. Concerns were expressed about federal and local government funding and the possibility of dealing with underfunding by crowdsourcing, charging fees for services, promoting philanthropy and considering the library as a creator of profits.

“Public libraries are ... booming ... and their future seems assured.”

Staffing for the future was also a concern. The reports noted that professional skill sets would change and new and different talent would be employed to work alongside LIS professionals, contributing their particular skills to the delivery of services and programs. Funding was closely linked to staffing, and there were concerns about reduced staff numbers and a need for professional development to cater to new demands.

Technology, as would be expected in any consideration of the future, was also strongly represented in the reports, but perhaps surprisingly it was not the most prominent issue. Views on the future of ebooks, the internet and particularly mobile devices were expressed with an acknowledgement that literacy, specifically digital literacy, was going to become increasingly important.

All five of these themes interconnect in a way that does not allow any one of them to be isolated from the others. Public libraries need to be adequately funded for their communities to engage in their desired activities, enabled by appropriate staff and technology.

Unsurprisingly, none of the reports considered that public libraries would not survive into the future. On the contrary, public libraries are, by all accounts, booming (just do an internet search to see how often this is reported) and their future seems assured. Today was yesterday's future and it will be tomorrow's past, and it remains to be seen how important each of the themes reported here will turn out to be and what newer crystal balls will predict. ✨

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