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SENATE

ENVIRONMENT, COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION
TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Role of libraries in the online environment

TUESDAY, 20 MAY 2003

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SENATE
ENVIRONMENT, COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
AND THE ARTS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 20 May 2003

Members: Senator Cherry (*Chair*), Senator Tierney (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Lundy, Mackay, Tchen and Wong

Substitute members: Senator Moore for Senator Wong

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Allison, Bolkus, Boswell, Brown, Buckland, George Campbell, Carr, Chapman, Conroy, Coonan, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Ferris, Harradine, Harris, Knowles, Lees, Mason, McGauran, Murphy, Nettle, Payne, Ridgeway and Watson

Senators in attendance: Lundy, Mackay, Moore and Tchen

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The role of libraries as providers of public information in the online environment, having particular regard to:

- (a) the current community patterns of demand for public information services throughout libraries, including the provision of such information online;
- (b) the response by libraries (public, university, research) to the changing information needs of Australians, including through the provision of online resources;
- (c) possible strategies which would enhance the wider use and distribution of information resources held by libraries, including the establishment of library networks, improved online access in libraries, online libraries, and greater public knowledge and skill in using library resources;
- (d) the use of libraries to deliver information and services over the Internet to more effectively meet community demands for public information in the online environment; and
- (e) the roles of various levels of government, the corporate sector and libraries themselves in ensuring the most effective use of libraries as primary public information resource in the online environment.

WITNESSES

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Committee met at 2.27 p.m.

KNIGHT, Mr Robert, Director, Board of Public Libraries Australia Ltd; and Manager, Community and Recreation Services, Wagga Wagga City Council

MAKIN, Ms Lynne, Chair, Board of Public Libraries Australia Ltd

ACTING CHAIR (Senator Tchen)—I welcome by teleconference Ms Lynne Makin and Mr Robert Knight. Thank you both for giving us your time today. It is much appreciated. The committee has your submission before it, which it has already published. Would you like to make any alteration or correction to that written submission at this stage?

Ms Makin—The only thing that has changed is that the Board of Public Libraries Australia Ltd was called the Interim Steering Committee of Public Libraries Australia; it has changed its name. I am the chair of the board and Mr Knight is a director on the board.

ACTING CHAIR—The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should you at any stage wish to give your evidence, part of your evidence, or answers to specific questions in private you may ask to do so and the committee will consider your request. You are reminded that evidence given to the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. I also inform you that the giving of false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute a contempt of the Senate. I now invite you to make opening statements before we move to questions.

Ms Makin—We would like to thank you very much for inviting us to address the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee in relation to inquiries into the Australian telecommunications network and the role of libraries in the online environment. In particular we are excited by the opportunities that Public Libraries Australia will be able to offer to governments, to public libraries and to the community. We welcome your questions today. Mr Knight also has some opening remarks.

Mr Knight—I want to say a little about the history of Public Libraries Australia. Public Libraries Australia is not a new concept. It is not something that sprung up a couple of years ago. In fact, it was instigated in 1996 and has since been confirmed at several levels by publications such as the Cultural Ministers Council document entitled *2020 Vision: Towards the Libraries of the Future* and various other reports that have very much acknowledged the role of public libraries in information provision both in person and in the electronic environment. Public libraries have 1,700 outlets throughout Australia and they physically serve approximately 95 per cent of Australia's population, with the exception of those who live in very remote areas. Public libraries have in excess of 50 per cent of the population as members. They have a very broad geographic reach. They have a developed physical infrastructure—that is, buildings. They have a very large contingent of trained information professionals and they are supported by two levels of government at this stage, which are generally state and local government.

Public Libraries Australia seeks to aggregate, advocate, advance and coordinate the extraordinary power that public libraries have to service not only individuals and communities but also governments. We are very pleased to be in a position to address the committee to discuss how Public Libraries Australia intends to go about that task and what contributions we

may seek from levels of government to help us to do that, and also, of course, how governments may expect to benefit from Public Libraries Australia. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—Ms Makin, do you wish to make or expand upon any additional points?

Ms Makin—No; that is as far as I would like to go at this point.

ACTING CHAIR—We will move to questions. I first call on Senator Moore.

Senator MOORE—Ms Makin and Mr Knight, we have been fortunate to hear a range of very strong and passionate views from librarians across the country on the very issues you identified. You said that the group has been formed to advocate, aggregate, coordinate and all of those other things, and you said you wanted to talk to us about exactly what you require to continue to operate and how you are going to do it. I would like to hear your comments on both of those issues. What do you require from government to continue to operate in the way you want to? How are you going to get it?

Mr Knight—Going back in history to 1996, there have been a number of very committed people with a lot of very good ideas about how we may create an umbrella organisation for public libraries for the things that we talked about—the aggregation, advocacy, advancement and coordination. But the issue has always been one of resourcing and how we are going to develop a piece of infrastructure. At this point I might add that librarians are very famous for being able to do quite a lot with relatively little.

We are not thinking at this stage about a multimillion-dollar project; we are thinking more of some support from our membership. That will come through membership fees at the grassroots level via libraries and local government. We are also thinking of support at the state level through state library networks. They have indicated their commitment to some provision of funding. We are also very much hoping that, through demonstrating to the federal government the way in which public libraries can meet some of the information needs both in person and in the online environment, we be able to persuade the federal government to give some seed funding to the establishment of a body that will allow us to staff and promote what we are trying to do here.

One example which very much comes to my mind when talking about the sort of thing that we can assist the federal government with harks back to the Commonwealth regional information strategy, which was very broadly advertised last year through a freecall 1800 number and a web site. Public libraries are perfectly positioned to do work like that—that is, distribution of information—either online or in person, to constituents. They have already demonstrated their capacity to do that with the very successful Australian Bureau of Statistics library extension program, where libraries are hosts to the public looking at statistical information produced by the ABS. That has recently been extended to an electronic system.

The other thing, and probably one of the largest holes in our capacity at the moment, is the very fragmented infrastructure—that is, online infrastructure—that public libraries have. There is a fairly patchy connectivity network on the one hand and variable library management systems on the other. Certainly, some money towards the redevelopment and reconfiguration of a true

online environment would be very helpful. They are the particular areas that we see as the most in need in order for Public Libraries Australia to begin its work.

Senator MOORE—You have two clear recommendations. How would you then progress that? What would be your strategy for getting the ear of government?

Mr Knight—What we would like to do is perhaps utilise this forum and the public library network. We have already discussed that there are around 1,600 or 1,700 outlets. Those libraries could start at the ground level and work with their local federal members to promote these things. Public Libraries Australia already has a pilot project. To demonstrate its coordination role, one of its first activities is to select one library from each state to participate in a regional initiatives program, should we be successful in gaining funding. I think that, once we have demonstrated this, what we are talking about will be much clearer to the federal government. But existing examples such as the ABS product are the sorts of things we are talking about—our real capacity to deliver, very successfully, using existing infrastructure and trained staff, to a very broad base of the Australian population.

Senator MOORE—How representative will your body be? What is the take-up of the membership to which you referred?

Ms Makin—At this point in time we are just going out to get our membership. We have been setting up the body as a company limited by guarantee, because it had to be set up that way to operate across Australia. Our representation is coming from across all states. It is coming from all levels in public libraries, whether they are regional or one-service, one-council operations. We are also supported by the Australian Local Government Association. We have a relationship with ALIA, the Australian Library and Information Association, which is the peak professional body for all libraries in Australia. They have recognised that one area that they have not been able to tap into is the public libraries area across Australia, so we are working together with them to aggregate all our advocacy powers and our ability to deliver to our members through those two bodies. So the representation is going to be quite broad, but it will be basically public libraries.

Senator MOORE—Do you see any barriers because of the very historical nature of the state based library networks and the fact that, traditionally, there has been a variation in the way libraries are funded between states, which creates some differences in approach across the country?

Ms Makin—There have been, and it is surprisingly good to know that, particularly in places like South Australia and the Northern Territory, we have those people on board. At this point in time they do not see any issues with that. We may hit walls when we want to do a particular project, but we do not believe they are going to be barriers that we cannot either break down or work our way through.

Senator MOORE—My next question is to do with the variation in the way that hardware has been distributed to public libraries across the country. The public library network has received hardware in different ways. There does not seem to be any coordination in the way that they are funded or what future plans are. Does your membership have any view on that?

Ms Makin—I believe we do, in that not only the hardware has been discussed. We also have issues, which Robert has already spoken about, with telecommunications and software. We have been looking at it so that in the future, if we could get the three levels of government around a table with us, we could look at how we access the hardware and the software and how we provide telecommunications. If, as national body, we were able to do that by setting standards and through buying power and support for those smaller and remote councils then I think we could address the issues. It is something that is very pertinent. I know that at my library service six PCs arrived that I knew nothing about because there was no coordination.

The same can be said about telecommunications. I put in the submission from Public Libraries Australia that in the telecommunications area as well we were never recognised as a network, and had some of that money from Networking the Nation been put into Public Libraries Australia you would have had most of the country connected by now. The same would apply to hardware. If we could look at standards and at what is needed to be delivered and we actually had Public Libraries Australia as a body sitting behind the roll-out of those things then I think we could make something better from it.

Mr Knight—I have one comment on that matter, to add to what Lynne has said. A lot of public library hardware has been the result of grant initiatives that have arrived—and are most welcome, I might add—without much thought being given, either by the funding body or the accepting library, to how recurrent issues may be handled in the future.

Senator MOORE—Absolutely.

Mr Knight—What we have in many libraries—particularly rural and remote libraries, which we are quite familiar with in our area—is ageing computer stock in an era when it is important for computers to be up to date in order to handle the latest and greatest innovations. That is a significant problem which is coming home to roost for many libraries.

Senator MOORE—The points which you and Ms Makin have made are exactly the concerns I have.

Senator LUNDY—I am very interested in the concept of the collective buying power of public libraries across the country. Have you had any discussions as yet with any telecommunications carriers or indeed any offers from carriers, including Telstra, to perhaps drop the commercial rates at which you are currently purchasing your telecommunications and data connection services?

Ms Makin—No, we have not done that formally. I would like to talk about a program that the Upper Murray Regional Library—of which I am the CEO—is running, which is a mobile satellite project. It was the first of its kind in the world, and in doing it we are able to bring real-time online access to information to very remote communities through our mobile libraries. The downside of this is the high cost of data transfer. We are hoping at the end of this pilot to sit down with Telstra and other carriers and see if we can use some leverage. This project could potentially go across Australia—not only to mobile libraries but to anywhere in Australia. This technology will provide answers, whether they relate to health or education, for anyone who is mobile in any way—someone who is sitting out in the middle of the desert or, as in our case, up in the Snowy Mountains. We have not yet got to the point of sitting down with Telstra, but we

have been asked by our potential members if that would be one of the things we would do, and it is one of the things we will be undertaking.

Senator LUNDY—Given that you provide such significant services to the public, have you ever approached a carrier and asked for a subsidised or cheaper rate?

Ms Makin—Yes, we have. I have been talking to Telstra with this project in mind. The answer that came back was that if we were sitting around with a table with Telstra and we demonstrated that we had X number of customers out there, then they would look at a rate. At the time I talked to them, Public Libraries Australia was not in existence. I have not gone back, because we have to have our membership on board in the next month, and after that we will be looking at these projects. It seems to me that if we were to pursue this and we were sitting down with Telstra—or with several other carriers, so that we have the competition out there—we could say to them: ‘If you can provide a data rate for us you can have customers right across Australia.’

Mr Knight—I would like to provide some input there as well. My previous position in life was as director of the Riverina Regional Library, which is adjacent to Lynne’s Upper Murray Regional Library, and we have had very much the same discussion with carriers in the past, always trying to drive a bargain. I think we had Telstra, Optus and anyone else—although there were not many others in the country—who was providing services at that stage. This was in the mid-1990s. The answer was always that the business volume was not significant enough for them to do anything with it.

The question we have now is very much a chicken and egg thing. We really need the network before we can get the discount, but we also need some promises of a discount to establish the network. One of the issues we very much want to drive home to the federal government is that there is an enormous opportunity when you aggregate the purchasing power of 1,700 libraries, but in order to achieve and manage that aggregation we have to have a body that has the time to dedicate to that. I would suggest that the sort of money we are looking at is \$1 million over five years to really get some runs on the board and get this network established and moving.

Senator LUNDY—Taking that a bit further, in your opening statement, Ms Makin, you mentioned not having received any federal funding. Do you see opportunities in programs like Networking the Nation, BARN or any of those social bonus programs funded from Telstra sale profits as a potential source of the sort of capital you are talking about to establish the network?

Ms Makin—Yes, there are possibilities, but one of the cornerstones of Public Libraries Australia is that we do not want to be continually asking for handouts. What we really want is to become an organisation that would be sitting around a table with a business proposition for that money. So if we were able to get the money to set up the network, that would be good, but we do not want it just as a handout. We would like it to be something for which we are accountable as well, because we see this body as growing and having the potential to deliver, for a long time, a range of services for all levels of government—particularly the federal government. So to start off with a handout mentality, if you like, is not where we want to go. But if the money to build this network could be found within the Networking the Nation pool, we would not say no to it.

Senator LUNDY—This is a bit of a devil’s advocate question: what makes Public Libraries Australia think that it might be the point of coordination for the aggregation of government demand for bandwidth in rural and regional Australia? What do you have to offer or to bring to that process, given that a number of state governments are doing it already but there is plenty of scope for the federal government to become involved?

Mr Knight—I will answer that and then maybe Lynne will have something to add. It has been fairly comprehensively demonstrated that the states, as well as they may be organised amongst themselves, have not managed—because there has been no peak body to assist them to do so—to have that critical coordination role that will take advantage of the whole 1,700 libraries.

There is a significant groundswell from our research, from responses that we have had to the establishment of Public Libraries Australia, from the submissions to this particular inquiry, I understand, and from people on the ground—notably, public libraries—in favour of developing a national network that will allow the libraries to be the one point of access. The reason we think libraries can do it is that we do so many other things already. Libraries are focal points for their communities, particularly in rural and remote communities where, quite often, they are the only remaining piece of infrastructure after droughts, floods, famines and whatever else might happen to hit a region. Libraries are very much under pressure at the moment to become technology access points, meeting places and providers of social support—and now we are seeing them become multipurpose, which is fantastic.

Libraries are not always terribly well funded, but we are seeing them being converted to community technology centres, regional telecentres and all sorts of other things, and for that reason we believe that they have the capacity to do more. The staff are there, trained and community and customer service focused. All we need is some coordination body to assist in aggregating the demand requirements from government and other places and to somehow deliver those through the public library network. We can do it—we have done it in our own regions. We have done it quite successfully in the state of New South Wales, where both Lynne and I have been quite prominent in the regional library managers network. I believe it is a natural progression for us to do this at the national level.

Senator LUNDY—Thank you very much for that.

ACTING CHAIR—Mr Knight and Ms Makin, in your submission you say you believe:

... a consolidated approach to online infrastructure, connectivity and content would establish a national information distribution network through public libraries that has never been achieved in Australia.

You also hold up a model, which is the UK People’s Network model. According to your submission, the UK project was to connect all 4,300 public libraries to the information superhighway by the end of 2002. Can you give us any further information—have they made any progress on that?

Ms Makin—I will preface this by saying that Robert was over in the UK when this was happening. My information is that, yes, that has been achieved, and we have been getting information via web sites on the continuation of this network. Other services are being added to it, because it has now been rolled out across the UK and it is now accessible for all sorts of other

information that the government wishes to give people. But I will let Robert speak to that, because he was over there.

Mr Knight—I was the recipient of the Albert Maynard scholarship through the New South Wales Local Government and Shires Association in 2000. During 2001 I undertook a study looking at the effect of what I called ‘rural shrink’ on remote and rural communities. Whilst England is vastly different from the other countries that I visited, Canada and the United States—their idea of ‘different’ is quite different to ours, quite clearly—there was nevertheless some evidence of attrition in certain parts of England, where services to communities had been withdrawn.

Libraries in particular were run-down. They had previously been the province of counties. The tax system there did not allow adequate investment in libraries, and they really were quite appalling. The Blair government, some years ago, looked into the best ways of provisioning for an online environment, and they noted that there were 4,300 public libraries. They now call them their ‘street corner’ universities, which is the most wonderful description of libraries I have heard, because it does acknowledge their multiple focuses of providing both education and a social place.

In answer to the question about where that has gone, the initiative continues to roll out. I suspect that the 2002 deadline has not quite run as on time as it might. Nevertheless, the important thing is that the government recognised that libraries have invested an extraordinary amount of money into that—about £170 million, and you have to multiply that by three to get the figure in Australian dollars. They took a multipronged approach which provided not only connectivity but also some ongoing funding for hardware, staff training and public funding. So it was all about taking a very broad view of how people in England may access the online environment. This is very much the philosophy that we would advocate for Australia. Our issues of distance are, of course, much more significant and much more debilitating for many Australians.

I would invite any of you who have the opportunity to attend the Country Public Libraries Association of New South Wales conference at Tweed Heads from 2 to 4 July. Mr Chris Batt from England, who was one of the major drivers behind this initiative, will speak. That will certainly update us on the status of that situation. The Richmond-Tweed Regional Library is the host library. It could be a very interesting experience.

Senator TCHEN—I think the committee is tempted.

Mr Knight—Good; be tempted.

Ms Makin—If you require any further information, let either of us know because we have all the information here if you require it.

Senator TCHEN—Thank you. Earlier, both Senator Moore and Senator Lundy spoke to you about the cost aspects. From what you have just described it seems that the UK public library system—and, of course, the geography is different, the UK has about three times our public libraries, and we are a much larger country—is probably more run-down than ours. You certainly

gave us some idea of the money that we are talking about. Based on that, are you able to advise us on what you believe should happen in Australia and what investment we would be looking at?

Mr Knight—I must admit that we have not done an extensive costing of it.

Senator TCHEN—No, but just from your knowledge of the UK project what investment do you think we should be looking at in Australia?

Mr Knight—My guess would be that, given that the UK has probably three times as many people as Australia and about three times as many libraries, if we said \$170 million, instead of £170 million, then we could be getting very close to a hit. That would certainly provide an extraordinary injection into the capacity of Australians to access information on an equitable basis. One of my main contentions about public libraries is that the equity of access that is provided does not depend on somebody's ability to buy things or to pay for things. Generally speaking, access is available remotely for those people who have that access at home, but everyone is welcomed into the library without any discrimination.

Senator TCHEN—At the beginning of your submission you say that public libraries are an 'access point for equitable access to recreational, information and educational support for Australian residents'. I found it interesting that you mentioned the recreational aspect. I suspect that will be of varying importance depending on what level of public library we are talking about. At the municipal library level I would say that recreational use is probably a fairly important component. Do you see this different emphasis making a difference to the type of service we need to provide through libraries, particularly an Internet type service?

Ms Makin—No, I do not think so. What we are finding is that a lot of people are still using libraries for recreational reading—fiction books, story books and things for children. That usage is still there. It will change, I think, in the long, long term because they have got a different generation coming through who are used to the online environment. But I do not think it changes what we need to do. We still need that access, whether we are in a recreational library or in an information library, because people that are coming in for their recreational reading are now starting to use the Internet. When I was in one of my libraries the other day, a lady in her 80s came in. Although she is a great reader, her recreation is doing crosswords. So now the Internet, with access to online services, is becoming important to her because of the information she can get there that she cannot find it anywhere else. So I do not see that that is a difference.

Mr Knight—I was in a forum not terribly long ago—it may have been the Library Council of New South Wales, of which I am a member—where we were discussing the way that information packaging and demand are changing in libraries. When I went to school, you had a textbook which would answer your subject. Very similarly, in a library there would be a book on the subject, you would get the book, you would do your assignment and you would bring it back. These days, people are tending to 'graze'—that was the term that I heard, and it sounded quite good. They take quick bites of information from a vast variety of sources, many of which are Internet, online sources, others being in more traditional print format.

The other important thing, when we are talking about the mix of recreation and information seeking and behaviour in that way, is that libraries are playing a very significant role as a communications outlet for people who wish to use email but do not have that opportunity at

home. We have many visitors—tourists, backpackers, children and seniors, particularly—who are starting to see the library as the main source of Internet, online access if they do not have it immediately available elsewhere. So that is an important one for us as well.

ACTING CHAIR—The reason I asked is that I wonder whether, particularly when we come to funding, we need to separate out the recreation components from the education and information components of the service. Some people would tell us that the main use of the Internet by the public is actually recreational—game playing and so on. I am not sure whether we can justify putting in public funding to provide an opportunity for people to play computer games. If the public library has this embedded recreational function, how do we isolate it?

Mr Knight—That is a very interesting question. I would certainly challenge that the main use of electronic technology or online access in libraries is for recreational purposes. In fact, there is the capacity for libraries—depending on the act that governs libraries in any particular state—to charge for some aspects of those things and not for others.

Notwithstanding the fact that local governments already provide a very significant amount of funding for public libraries, particularly covering all current acquisitions of both print and non-print, recreational and non-recreational information, it is not our expectation that any of that amount of support, at either the state or the local level, would decline. But we would see the role of the federal government as assisting especially in the online environment and in the development of the organisation that is Public Libraries Australia, who provide that very important top layer of infrastructure equity that will allow us to do some of the things that we currently cannot do for ourselves and for our government.

ACTING CHAIR—In the last paragraph of your submission you say:

Please let's not waste any further time or money on the development of parallel infrastructure for online service delivery when key outcomes can be achieved by the enhancement of an extensive, reliable and pre-existing public library network.

I wonder whether you would care to expand on that. Which one of you would like to take this free kick?

Ms Makin—I will start. We believe that we do have an extensive and pre-existing public library network. It is reliable in its current set-up in that we do get information out very quickly. I sit on the board and I run library services in two states. It is surprising how quickly we can get our information out over the networks that exist in those two states. We do not tend to interact with the other states because we do not have an established network into them. In looking at where the money should go, we believe that the potential exists here. It needs an enhancement and a standard so that, once we press a button, information goes out across Australia through that network. The remote areas in particular are the ones we are looking at. They would need to be coming on more in the network. Robert, do you have anything to add?

Mr Knight—I have a couple of things to add. I will put my neck on the line here because I have a feeling—they sound like my words—

Ms Makin—A combination, actually.

Mr Knight—I have been on this soapbox for years and I have presented papers at many conferences. The telecottage initiative of the early 1990s, whereby many telecottages were set up within various organisations, was going to do great things for the equity and provision of telecommunications. If we did an audit of how many of those telecottages still existed we would find that there are very few and those that do exist are probably in public libraries. Once again, Networking the Nation was an enormous opportunity for an online solution to be created nationally. It seems to me that once again we went down the track of establishing telecentres in all sorts of places that, at the time and for the period of the funding, were most appropriate. But I would be most interested to see at the end of the three-year funding period how many of those are still in existence.

Once again, I would put my neck on the line and say that if libraries had been vested with that responsibility and that funding you could be fairly certain that at the end of those three years you would have a network with which to further the aims and objectives. Whilst we acknowledge the appropriateness and the right of other organisations to develop infrastructure, I do not know if any of us could name another network where up to 50 per cent of the population visit on a regular basis, that already has existing infrastructure, that is funded by two levels of government, that has trained information professionals in existence there, and that has the capacity to do more—bearing in mind that many of our small libraries are open for perhaps 10 hours a week. With some of our small branches the building is sitting there dormant for a lot of the rest of the time, because of the cost of employing staff and opening the doors. There is so much more opportunity to expand and extend existing infrastructure through thoughtful provision of connectivity.

Senator MOORE—I am sorry this is the last question. I could listen to your answers for a long time, because it is getting to the crux of what we have been seeking throughout this whole inquiry. Senator Tierney, who cannot be with us this afternoon, has been taking up the point that Senator Tchen referred to earlier about costing in libraries and the philosophy of the public library network to provide free access to information for everybody, as opposed to a concept of using some form of user pays for situations. Senator Tierney asked about perhaps using the health care card system whereby those customers—and I hate that term—who visit the library and have health care cards could continue to use the information technology facility free of charge, and those people who could afford to pay may be able to pay some kind of rate for the use of services. That would bring an income stream into the library system. I hope I am reflecting his question accurately. I would like to hear some comment from you as representatives of the public library network about how you feel about that kind of proposal.

Mr Knight—That is a very difficult question, particularly because in New South Wales, and I suspect elsewhere, that is embedded in the legislation. The Library Act is currently under review in New South Wales and the requirement for the provision of free public core library services will be strengthened. Core is now being extended to the online environment in New South Wales and if a public library is to receive government funding, it is based on meeting those core requirements of free access. I suppose the history of public libraries has been about freedom of equity, freedom of access and freedom of information provision. I think it is the cornerstone of that which makes the public library network a great place for people throughout Australia to access information, regardless of their economic circumstances or their social standing. I do take your point that there is an affordability issue here but, at this stage, I think the grassroots would

override the preference to charge for the principle of free access. That is on the basis of taking a straw poll. Perhaps Lynne has something to add to that.

Ms Makin—I can only reiterate what Robert has said. He said he knows New South Wales; I know New South Wales and Victoria, and the same philosophy applies in both states. In Victoria, it is free and equitable access to all information for all people. For us to think about charging would undermine that and I do not think that the grassroots, being the public library managers and public library staff, would be very supportive of that. I think there would be an outcry from the public because of our history of being free to people.

I would also extend that to my mobile libraries. At the moment, it costs a huge \$8.58 a megabit for data under the current pilot project which is being funded through Networking the Nation. It is costing us about \$7,000 a month to keep two mobile libraries out there providing this access. When we get to the end of this project, we will be looking at other ways of funding, but we will certainly not be charging the people out there, because they are often the people who most need access to information. When we were first talking about access to the Internet, I can remember someone talking about using the health card. They were saying that if people could afford to pay they should pay, and that anyone who had a health card would get free access, the same as they get other services for free. But that would really start to make that divide between those who can and those who cannot pay, and that would then create more division within your community. I know that libraries and public library staff would not be supportive of that.

ACTING CHAIR—From memory, I think Senator Tierney's concern was in relation to evidence he heard that some libraries have tourists coming in to use their Internet email facility for free. He was concerned that overseas tourists might be accessing a facility which is provided for Australians. This is interesting because when I raised the issue earlier about the recreational use of the library facility, particularly for Internet use, I think Mr Knight suggested that one option might be to charge for that service. Is that correct, Mr Knight?

Mr Knight—That is correct. I think we have taken the question perhaps in a different way. If we are talking about that sort of access, many libraries have established Internet kiosks where there is a fee-for-service for email of the sort you are talking about. Some libraries also charge for that and I understand that that latitude will probably remain under the revision of the act—although I am not entirely sure about that. I think that that is perhaps different from charging our own constituents, based on economic status or affordability, for the seeking of information. We could certainly have a discussion in and around the provision of extension services to non-residents of Australia.

ACTING CHAIR—I think that is probably the direction in which we are going. I do not think that charging residents would be what Senator Tierney had in mind. As there are no further questions, thank you, Ms Makin and Mr Knight, as your evidence has been most informative and interesting. The committee thanks you for presenting it.

[3.13 p.m.]

NELSON, Ms Noelle Lesley, Library and Cultural Development Manager, Newcastle Region Library

ACTING CHAIR—Welcome. Thank you for joining us today. It is much appreciated. The committee has a submission from the Joint Library Advisory Committee of the Newcastle Region Library before it, which we have already published. Would you like to make any alterations or corrections to that written submission at this stage?

Ms Nelson—I would like to update the percentage which is quoted on page 2. The figure should be 32.6 per cent for all residents covered by the Newcastle Region Library.

ACTING CHAIR—Is that an error or an update?

Ms Nelson—It is an update.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you, Ms Nelson. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should you at any stage wish to give your evidence, part of your evidence or answers to specific questions in private you may ask to do so and the committee will consider your request. You are reminded that evidence given to the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. I also inform you that the giving of false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute a contempt of the Senate. I now invite you to make an opening statement before we move to questions.

Ms Nelson—Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to the committee today. I represent the Newcastle Region Library, which consists of 13 branches across four councils—Newcastle, Dungog, Gloucester and Port Stephens. We operate under a joint library agreement, which means that smaller councils can provide a better library service by accessing centralised services—such as information technology, collection management, reference, children's programs and special needs—on a cost-sharing basis.

I have a few facts and figures that may help describe the type of service we offer and place my comments in perspective. Newcastle Region Library has the highest circulation of any public library service in New South Wales, lending over two million items per annum. Our active membership was 105,000 in June 2002, which represents 51 per cent of our resident population. In 2001-02 we had over 850,000 visits to Newcastle libraries alone and our central library currently caters for over a thousand visitors a day. The number of bookings and hours spent accessing the Internet has trebled over the last four years. We offer Internet training courses designed to meet user needs. Informal assistance is provided, particularly to satisfy common inquiries: how to use online information, lodge tax returns, access Centrelink, look at employment sites or undertake online banking.

The library is the most visited part of council's web site, and there has been an increase in placing reservations via our online catalogue. That increase has been 212 per cent since it was first made available. The most popular areas on the library's web site are those where the library

has been responsible for publishing its own content, including the *Newcastle Morning Herald* indexes, our cemetery indexes and earthquake databases which we have published on the Newcastle earthquake.

Our reference service is experiencing increased inquiries via email. Inquiries are becoming more complex as users are able to satisfy some of their simpler questions via Internet resources. We provide access to eight databases through NSW.net, and in addition we subscribe to another 11 databases. We have a significant local studies collection with an online photobank collection of 50,000 images. Demand is coming from all sectors of the community and, in particular, from families, students, businesses, consultants, retirees and those with an interest in lifelong learning.

Therefore, contrary to some predictions of Internet proliferation making libraries redundant, libraries continue to satisfy an ongoing growth in community demand. The growth in demand can be explained by the recognised role that libraries have in being the focal point for the delivery of information in local communities. Public libraries are welcoming, accessible to everyone, offer extensive opening hours—including weekends—and are recognised by the community as a reliable source of information.

Public libraries are also a critical component of our educational infrastructure, providing not only resources but also a place to study. They also play an important role in the local economy by supporting small businesses and consultants in their research and even equipment needs. Libraries are vital cultural institutions, with many providing exhibition space and public programs, and they maintain and preserve local collections.

While public libraries are performing well, we face at least four key challenges. We need to subscribe to online resources in order to make them available to the community. Consortia arrangements such as NSW.net assist greatly but they need to be maximised to ensure that libraries can help bridge the digital divide. The cost of IT infrastructure is increasing. Libraries need to maintain a constant upgrading of computers and speed of connections. Preservation and digitisation costs are a major issue for Newcastle. We have recently exhausted the number of grants we are eligible to apply for under the National Library. However, we have the second largest local studies collection in the state and items there will be at risk if we are unable to meet our preservation requirements. There is a great deal of library building development occurring across New South Wales. Our ageing building infrastructure is not suitable for the services expected by contemporary library users and especially does not provide enough room for the required number of computers.

Public libraries are quiet success stories but may be in danger of being taken for granted. Their current level of funding by other than local government does not reflect the respect with which they are held in the community. A coordinated strategy that recognises and funds public libraries as primary information access points is essential to ensure that public libraries can continue to meet the information needs of the community.

Senator MOORE—You answered a lot of the questions in your statement. I saw you taking notes in the last session. Are you a member or supporter of Public Libraries Australia, the group we have just heard from?

Ms Nelson—I am not a member but I am a supporter of the concept of Public Libraries Australia. I am familiar with the groundwork that has been done by Lynne Makin and Robert Knight. I think the majority of public library managers across New South Wales would also be supportive of Public Libraries Australia. We have long needed the one advocate to speak on behalf of public libraries across the nation. That is something that we have lacked. This provides a really good opportunity for that.

Senator MOORE—The process of having a national voice to lobby levels of government is one that you support.

Ms Nelson—Yes, definitely.

Senator MOORE—Your submission and also your subsequent points picked up a lot of the things that we have been searching for in the inquiry. One of them is the way online facilities have been provided to libraries. They seem to have come on as a result of grants and as a result of Networking the Nation, but the coordination has seemed to have been lacking. In terms of ongoing funding for IT resources and the relationship that your libraries have with your councils, is the expectation that the councils will continue to support the computer hardware and software even after grant money and Networking the Nation money is over?

Ms Nelson—The experience has been that the council will pick up running of computers and other costs. The other arrangement with the regional library is that there is some cost-sharing involved with the other councils. We are able to provide IT support and have managed to negotiate an upgrade to our library management software that has been affordable for all of the councils.

Senator MOORE—You have actually given us really good statistics on the usage of computers and the process and how it has arisen. Has there been a significant change of workload for your staff members in terms of managing the computer access? You also mentioned that you also provide basic support, rather than formal training, to people on the computers.

Ms Nelson—We actually provide both. We provide Internet awareness sessions, which are more of an introduction to the Internet, and we are providing more specialised courses based on the needs that the community expresses to us. They are things like how to use email and how to search family history and so on. There is an increasing staff workload by doing that. There is also, possibly, an increase in frustration due to staff not having enough time to spend with people in the library to provide the level of service they would like to be able to and which they have the ability, but not necessarily the time, to provide. We are looking at ways in which technology can free staff more so that they can be on the floor and away from desks. Things like self-check units are only just being introduced into Newcastle Region Library. They are more prevalent elsewhere. That is a cost issue as well. If we can have means whereby staff are actually released from some of the more mundane aspects of library service by using technology a lot better, they can actually provide the service that they have been trained to provide.

Senator MOORE—How are your staff receiving the training that they need to upgrade their skills into a different library environment?

Ms Nelson—We manage training in a number of ways. We run regular courses in house. The State Library does provide training for public library staff and we are very grateful for the assistance that they provide. It is an ongoing issue, because library users expect our staff to be very proficient. We make a reasonable investment from our library budget to ensure that we actually have the financial support to train our staff and to send them to conferences such as the one the previous speakers were talking about, so that they can keep up with not only skills but also current trends in library provision. That is an ongoing need that we need to meet out of our current budget.

Senator MOORE—Are there enough librarians?

Ms Nelson—That is a very interesting question.

Senator MOORE—We ask it everywhere. What about training and all of those professional issues involved in maintaining your profession?

Ms Nelson—I cannot think of any library service that would say there were enough librarians, because of what I have said—the expectations of the community are increasing. They are becoming far more aware of what is available, so they are looking for assistance to be able to make the best use of that. Training is provided through the tertiary institutions and they seem to be doing a very good job of that, particularly in the IT area. It is an ongoing issue within a library such as ours to ensure that our staff are multiskilled. Very recently we have reintroduced a system of staff rotation so that staff move through the different areas that we are able to provide as a central library—we are operating much like a mini state library, with reference areas, local studies, special needs, collection management, IT and so on. We take our responsibility of keeping our staff skills up to the maximum very seriously indeed.

Senator MOORE—Does Newcastle offer a degree in library skills?

Ms Nelson—There is a TAFE course available. The university librarian from the University of Newcastle is the next speaker—she will be able to provide you with a few more details there.

Senator MOORE—We have heard in a number of states that fewer students are choosing to get the tertiary qualification in library skills—the title of it changes from state to state. A couple of universities have even stopped offering this particular course. In New South Wales, are you aware of how many universities offer that particular training? If it is postgraduate, is there any link between student fees—the PELS scheme—and people choosing to take on the task?

Ms Nelson—I am not as aware of the university courses in New South Wales because I have recently moved here from South Australia. Again, Lynne Benton might be able to provide you with more details on that. It is interesting, though, that courses where librarians are being trained may not necessarily be titled library and information studies anymore; they can be information and knowledge management or they can just be a generic information studies course. So when people are looking at how librarians are being trained they need to look at the whole gamut of courses that are being provided now.

Senator MOORE—I will leave the consortia questions and those on copyright to Senator Lundy. But I would like to ask your opinion about payment of fees for services in libraries.

There are two aspects to that. The first is the concept of access of library services, particularly the IT services, to people who are tourists or are not Australian citizens. There is also the philosophical aspect of Australian citizens being able to use library services and whether there should perhaps be some kind of process where health care card holders could access all library services including IT under the current arrangements, which means they are normally free, and people who can afford to pay could be charged for access to other computer services, to emails, printing and those things. Do you have any views on those two separate but connected aspects of charging?

Ms Nelson—I would like to reiterate what the previous speaker said about the Library Act of New South Wales. That is an incredibly important piece of legislation because it enshrines the right of access to information. I think public libraries are an investment in having a better informed community, so I would support having core services which are free. We can look at value added services, and in those I would include things such as email, printing and so forth. I think libraries can legitimately make a charge for those. As for tourists coming in and using email, if libraries are charging for email in that way then their use by tourists would fall into that category as well.

The difficulty with looking at how people are using libraries is that you would not want librarians to be put in a policing role where they are having to look at who is using what for what purpose. I think that would totally change the culture of libraries, and how accessible and welcoming they are. So I would caution against any moves that would mean you were looking at a different range of users and having to watch their activities in the library.

Senator LUNDY—Do you subscribe to the Kinetica service provided by the National Library?

Ms Nelson—Yes, we do.

Senator LUNDY—Can you make some observations about the relative expense of that service and its value to your library?

Ms Nelson—Newcastle Region Library is a supporter of Kinetica in the whole concept of Kinetica being a national database of resources held across Australia . That is a very important resource to have. It is a costly service. It currently costs us just under \$15,000 per annum to use that service.

Senator LUNDY—What percentage, approximately, is that of your annual budget?

Ms Nelson—Our annual resource budget—we do not call it a book budget anymore—is \$630,000. That might give you some indication.

Senator LUNDY—I was just trying to get a feel for the proportion. You obviously think it is a valuable service—valuable enough to pay \$15,000 a year to access it.

Ms Nelson—Yes, we do think it is a valuable service. Ideally we would like to see the cost of that come down. At the moment the cost is based on usage regardless of how you are using it, so that if you go on and delete a record because it is an item you no longer have in your collection

that is charged just as much as if you are adding something to the database. I think one way of bringing down costs might be at least to allow subscriber libraries to keep their records up to date by making those sorts of deletions free of charge.

Senator LUNDY—In your submission you mentioned quite a significant digitised collection. I do not know if you have covered this.

Ms Nelson—No, I have not.

Senator LUNDY—Can you tell me how you funded that digitisation project?

Ms Nelson—Largely through state government grants. That has been significant because once we were able to do that we could continue to make that available to the whole of the community. But standards of digitisation have increased since we originally did that. The National Library encourages you not only to digitise but also to preserve the originals so that, as different formats become available, you still have the original. In this case, I am speaking about photographs, of which we have a collection of over 100,000 items. That is the collection that we feel is at risk. As I said before, we are beginning to run out of sources because we have exhausted the number of grants that are available to us through the National Library. There would be other significant regional collections across the country which are also facing difficulties in keeping up with preservation and digitisation costs.

Senator LUNDY—So it is not just a one-off; there are ongoing costs associated with maintaining and perhaps upgrading a digital collection? Is that what you are saying or is it primarily—

Ms Nelson—It is a primarily a one-off cost.

Senator LUNDY—In your submission, you make reference to the need for:

A National Information Strategy that recognises and funds public libraries as primary access points ... Such a strategy should, in partnership with libraries, set appropriate standards for service delivery.

Could you expand on the standards relating to the services you believe are necessary and appropriate?

Ms Nelson—The State Library provides its grants to New South Wales public libraries in accordance with them providing certain core services free. It provides its building development grants to libraries which meet certain standards, including the number of square metres that should be available and the number of PCs per head of population. That is a really good move because it means that councils then need to look at the type of service that they provide. It means that there can be more consistency of service so that any member of the Australian public, wherever they are, can expect a certain level of service if they walk into a public library. That is what I meant by having a national information strategy that would support that.

As I said earlier, public libraries are quiet success stories. If there were a national information strategy with adequate funding and with libraries providing the same consistent service across the nation—and if it needs a body like Public Libraries Australia to advocate for it, so be it—

then we could be proud of the type of service that we are providing and make sure our citizens are as informed as they can be.

Senator LUNDY—We have heard from many libraries—particularly the more regional and rural libraries—that there is great variation in the speed and quality of Internet connection, usually related to what infrastructure is available. Do you think that there needs to be a minimum standard with respect to issues like Internet connection speed, so that someone who uses a PC for Internet access in the library knows that it will not be as slow as a dog but that it will be efficient, reliable and fast, hopefully?

Ms Nelson—Absolutely. Having some integrated approach to infrastructure is really important. Maybe that is where the federal government could play a role. At the moment, public libraries are funded through state and local governments but they are not funded through the federal government. That is something that the federal government could well and truly pick up.

Senator LUNDY—Are you able to provide the committee, either now or by taking this question on notice, with the costs that you incur as a result of your telecommunications requirements? I am particularly interested in the Internet connections—I know that that is very hard to disaggregate in many cases—but I am also interested in the hardware and software associated with the Internet-connected PCs.

Ms Nelson—I can answer some of that now but I will provide more details to the committee as well. We have recently upgraded our nine Newcastle branch services to ADSL lines, and that is costing about \$1,000 per annum each. The other branches of the Newcastle Region Library at Dungog and Gloucester are operating through the NSW.net rural link, and Port Stephens has its own ISDN link. We have just had to meet that cost within this budget and we are looking to our next budget for the ADSL costs. Purely because of what you describe, people expect to be able to access Internet computers in a public library just as they can elsewhere, and so they should. Therefore, we have moved to ADSL. I will provide the rest of the information that you asked for.

Senator LUNDY—In respect of the costs associated with connectivity, have you ever approached Telstra or other carriers in pursuit of a hard bargain—a lower price—and have you received any offers from any of those carriers, or do you operate in a purely commercial arena when it comes to dealing with your telecommunications service providers?

Ms Nelson—I think the answer to that is probably similar to others I have heard as well, in that it is considered to be a commercial operation. Again, when it comes to carriers I think there is a role for the federal government to look at helping to get a discounted rate for public libraries across the nation.

Senator LUNDY—What about dealing with faults? Are you able to make any observations or share any of your experiences with faults or problems with your services— perhaps problems in getting faults rectified?

Ms Nelson—Newcastle Region Library is in a good position because we have an IT librarian. That person is well skilled and able to deal with our council's IT people, with professionals at Telstra and so on. Our services are provided at a reasonably high standard because of that person's abilities. Obviously, not every library is in that position.

Senator LUNDY—No. It certainly makes a difference when you have someone who knows who you have to talk to and how to get things fixed—that is great. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—What Internet access facilities do you have in your library? How many computers do you have?

Ms Nelson—We have 42 public access Internet computers in our library.

ACTING CHAIR—How were those funded?

Ms Nelson—Some of those have been funded through NSW.net and the rest have been funded through the four councils that I mentioned.

ACTING CHAIR—You say that your library has 13 branches.

Ms Nelson—Yes, 13 branches.

ACTING CHAIR—In the case of Public Libraries Australia would you count as one public library or as 13, because they mention that there are 15,000 libraries in Australia? Do you know whether you are counted as one or as 13?

Ms Nelson—Until I actually see the membership arrangements that they propose I cannot answer that accurately, except to say that people describe either library services—and in this case, in New South Wales, there are something like 100—or the number of branches.

ACTING CHAIR—So the figure of 15,000 probably includes your 13 branches. In running your library, do you get any funding support from the New South Wales state government?

Ms Nelson—Yes. All public libraries in New South Wales get an operating subsidy on a per capita basis. We are also eligible to apply for library grants from the Library Council of New South Wales, which we do on a regular basis, and have been successful in receiving such grants.

ACTING CHAIR—Is the subsidy received through the State Library or directly from the state government?

Ms Nelson—It is through the Library of Council New South Wales. The current proportion of state to local government funding in New South Wales is 90 per cent local government and 10 per cent state government.

ACTING CHAIR—Only 10 per cent from the state. Is that for the operating costs?

Ms Nelson—Yes, that is for the operating costs.

ACTING CHAIR—I assume that the way you provide your service to the community is prescribed in the Library Act, as to who gets the service and so on.

Ms Nelson—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—When you issue your library cards, what factors do you take into account? Do you check whether the people are New South Wales residents, Australian citizens or what?

Ms Nelson—Anybody within New South Wales can register. Obviously, we are getting people from Newcastle and the surrounding councils who want to become members of this library.

ACTING CHAIR—Do they have to be Australian citizens or Australian residents? What proof of identity do they need?

Ms Nelson—People do bring proof of identity with them, in terms of the usual points system that is used for other things.

ACTING CHAIR—One of the issues is whether it is appropriate for the library to charge people for services. Generally speaking, I understand that under the Library Act you are not permitted to make charges. What about tourists? That comes back to Senator Tierney's concern. We received evidence earlier that some libraries in tourist locations were quite proud of the number of tourists they served, particularly for emails and so on. But there is a net cost to the local council. Do you check on that?

Ms Nelson—As I said before, we charge for email access, so backpackers and other tourists coming into our library to use email would be making a contribution to that service.

ACTING CHAIR—So, under the Library Act, you are able to charge for email service?

Ms Nelson—Yes, because that is a value added service. It is not seen as a core service.

ACTING CHAIR—This question is one I put to previous witnesses. It concerns the library's recreational and informational and educational functions. Certainly the educational and informational function is a public service but the recreational function is a little questionable. When we talk about Internet connections, some people would consider Internet access to be largely for game playing, a recreational function. How would the library deal with that?

Ms Nelson—Could I come back to the first premise, about recreational functions perhaps not being as valid as informational functions?

ACTING CHAIR—No, I am not saying that. I am just saying that one is clearly a public service, whereas the recreational function may not be. I know that bread and circuses have been the traditional provision, but I would argue that most people do not see that recreation function as an essential public service.

Ms Nelson—I would like to explore that comment a bit. I think that the other aspect of libraries that is very important, and that we should not lose sight of, is encouraging people's information literacy—actually being able to read, to evaluate the information that they read and analyse it and so forth. People's learning to read is often done first of all in a recreational context. I think it is important to recognise that, and to recognise that the role that public libraries play in literacy is very important. When it comes to using the Internet, whether people are playing games on the Internet within public libraries is not something that I have observed a

great deal. People have to make the additional commitment to book a computer and to come into a library. So the majority of usage, I think you would find, is by students and people preparing job applications and so forth.

ACTING CHAIR—So you do not think the problem is big enough to be of concern?

Ms Nelson—Not at this stage, no.

ACTING CHAIR—Would that be the general case, or just in your area? It probably depends on the population profile as well, doesn't it?

Ms Nelson—It is not a concern that I have heard raised by public library managers in the various forums I have been involved in.

ACTING CHAIR—Just going back to what your obligations to residents are in terms of providing library service under the act, do you allow tourists to borrow? Let us suppose someone comes in and says, 'I'm a backpacker. I'm here for three months. Can I have a library card?'

Ms Nelson—I would have to check that. I am sorry, but I cannot answer that.

Senator MOORE—I have a question which leads onto our next witnesses from the university. Seeing this is a university town, is there any kind of cross arrangement between the university libraries and your own? Can people who are members of your library access the university library?

Ms Nelson—There is actually quite a bit of collaboration between the university and the public library system. The Newcastle Region Library is building its first library in 30 years, starting this year, which we are very excited about.

Senator MOORE—Congratulations.

Ms Nelson—That library will be located within the vicinity of the university so the university are also very excited because their overseas students will also be able to use that library in the extensive hours that we will provide. We have begun to discuss ways in which we might be able to share some licensing and share resources across both services. Of course we are both answerable and accountable for our own budgets, so that does make it difficult, but we are exploring some of those options. In this case, the Newcastle Region Library and the university are working in close partnership.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you. Before the inquiry started this morning I actually visited your library across the park. It is a very beautiful setting and a very friendly environment. I was particularly impressed with the display of historical materials.

Ms Nelson—I am glad you could see that.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you for coming along today. Your evidence has been both informative and interesting.

[3.59 p.m.]

ANDERSON, Mr Gregory, Director, Library Services, Auchmuty Library, University of Newcastle

BENTON, Ms Lynne Patricia, Executive Director, Education Services; and University Librarian, University of Newcastle

ACTING CHAIR—I welcome Ms Lynne Benton and Mr Gregory Anderson. Thank you for giving your time today; it is much appreciated. The committee received your submission this morning. Thank you for putting it together for us at such short notice. Is it the wish of the committee that the submission be published? There being no objection, it is so ordered. The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, but should you at any stage wish to give your evidence, part of your evidence or answers to any questions in private, you may ask to do so and the committee will consider your request. You are reminded that the evidence given to the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. I also inform you that the giving of false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute a contempt of the Senate. I invite you to make an opening statement before we move to questions.

Ms Benton—Thank you very much. I will speak for a minute or two and then hand over to Greg. I felt that it might be necessary to take a few seconds to explain the structure of the library at the University of Newcastle, which is rather unusual but very relevant to the discussion today. I am the University Librarian, but my official title is Executive Director, Education Services, a section that supports library services to the university community. It also provides teaching and learning support, by supporting the Learning Management System and other online learning environments; desktop service to staff and students through a help desk; and support for computing labs and so on.

So it is a much broader portfolio than just looking after the library—but by using the word ‘just’ I do not mean that the library is in any way a minor part of the work. The reason I raise that is that I think our structure reflects the fact that libraries find themselves in a much broader service environment than perhaps they were in in previous years, and that is often driven by the need for us to perform within an online environment. A great deal of the drivers for us to work closely with other areas of the university are about the fact that we spend at least half our budget on online learning resources. Greg will talk a little more about the detail of our library service.

Mr Anderson—I have been working in the sector now for 20 years, and over the last five to 10 years we have seen a proliferation of online resources being made available. I think, overall, it has been a great thing. Our students now have a lot more resources than they had in the past. We have had to grapple with escalating costs, even though we no longer subscribe to a lot of print resources. We had around 5,000 print subscriptions two or three years ago. Because we are now buying large packages of online information, we have over 35,000 online subscriptions.

There is certainly an increase in the material we are accessing. However, it means that a lot of people who are outside the university environment no longer have access. In the past, anyone could come into the library and have access to those 5,000 print subscriptions sitting on the

shelves. These days, they have to be a member of the university community so that they have a proper account in accordance with all our licence agreements. My major concern is that a lot of the funding that our government is paying to universities for resources, which then translates into subscriptions, is no longer as freely available as it was, due to licence agreements, authentication processes et cetera.

ACTING CHAIR—What is the university's response to that?

Mr Anderson—When we subscribe to an online service—for example, ScienceDirect, which is costing us around \$700,000 a year—the licence agreement says—

Senator MOORE—Can you repeat how much that is costing you?

Mr Anderson—\$A700,000.

Senator MOORE—A year?

Mr Anderson—A year, yes—and that is because our dollar at the moment is fairly strong. It is about \$US400,000. That purchases about 1,500 online journals.

ACTING CHAIR—So the cost is in US dollars, not Australian dollars?

Mr Anderson—Yes, it is always in US dollars. We always pay in the overseas currency of the originator. That means that, when our dollar was down to about 50c, it was extremely difficult to afford—

ACTING CHAIR—Very good for the farmers, though.

Mr Anderson—to purchase these resources. But the licence agreement we purchase says that it is only available to our community—in other words, staff and students. Even though a lot of the licence agreements acknowledge that it is possible to have what they call a visitor, there are very few universities that have the infrastructure to register someone online at the time—because you have to have a guest log-in, if you like. It is not as simple as in the old days, when someone would just go to the shelf. One of my major concerns too is about students from other universities. We all participate in reciprocal borrowing schemes so that the resources are freely available across the country, but the licence agreements we pay all preclude, say, a student from the University of Newcastle using the resources of Sydney University. It is just not allowed.

Ms Benton—University libraries work together to try and overcome some of these situations. The Council of Australian University Librarians has worked very hard to try and get to the point where there are partnership arrangements to meet some of these exorbitant costs. But it is very difficult to work out consortia deals with people like Elsevier that look after ScienceDirect, for example. John Shipp's committee, which has made recommendations on infrastructure spending and research spending to the committee and has attracted funding, has still been unable to get to the point where consortia deals can be encouraged with publishers. I am sure Greg can talk more about that.

Mr Anderson—I think that information is widely available, but you have to be within the system to access it. For example, it would be extremely difficult for a community member of Newcastle to just walk into the university library and access those 1,500 titles through ScienceDirect.

ACTING CHAIR—Is that all you wished to say in opening? If so, we will move to questions.

Mr Anderson—That is all we had as our opening comments.

Senator MOORE—Can you clarify exactly what the difference in your two roles are in terms of the particular way in which the university operates its education support. Ms Benton, you have told us a little about the job you have. I would like to know how your two roles interact, just for clarity in the way the structure operates.

Ms Benton—As University Librarian and Executive Director of Education Services, my role is to ensure a strategic focus for the library, for the support for teaching and learning, and for IT support. On that level, I represent our area within the university, nationally and internationally. I am very much focused on looking outwards, and I bring the three or four areas together so that they work together and provide a seamless service to staff and students. Greg, as Director of Library Services, is focused entirely on the quality of the library service and in meeting our strategic direction. I have other staff who lead the other areas I referred to and who work with Greg and me to bring it together as a whole. Then I take that whole into university portfolio committees, advising the Vice-Chancellor, meeting with the Council of Australian University Librarians and so on.

Senator MOORE—Who is in charge of the budget?

Ms Benton—Library specific?

Senator MOORE—Yes.

Ms Benton—On a library specific level, Greg would made recommendations about that; I am given the bucket of money for the lot operationally, if you like, and we work it out from there. The scholarly information resources budget is separate. Greg's staff advise upon how that is best committed.

Senator MOORE—Do you have library facilities at the three campuses? Am I right in assuming you have three campuses?

Mr Anderson—That is correct. We also have a lot of partnership arrangements. We have affiliations with, say, Hunter Area Health, because we have students based in the teaching hospitals. That also extends to New England, to the Orange area and just to where the university has established some teaching points. We have been able to work with some of these other libraries to ensure that, through authentication processes, our students still have access to online resources even though they may be remotely located. To return to the budget, this year we have a budget of around \$5 million. Approximately half of that is spent on online resources.

Senator MOORE—Is that following a trend? Is online expenditure going up as part of the—

Mr Anderson—Yes. A lot of the publishers usually package your print subscriptions. They say, ‘If you convert them to online, you will pay 90 per cent of the print cost.’ But they will then offer additional titles for more money, so you tend to be tempted to purchase a lot more of the content than you did in the past. We have a policy whereby we do not duplicate print with electronic. If it is available electronically, we purchase it because we now have a lot of students who are studying across the world, and we find that 24/7 access is what they prefer. They do not necessarily need to come into the library; they can access that information anywhere. It is quite convenient.

Senator MOORE—So is there any place for a print based student in your university?

Ms Benton—Yes.

Senator MOORE—What about some of the resources that you have not duplicated?

Mr Anderson—Because we made that decision—we say that we can’t afford to duplicate, because it usually means that we have to pay at least another 10 per cent or 20 per cent on top of the online subscription—we had to have a philosophical change from print to electronic. Our population has accepted that fairly well. The other thing is that, because of the digital agenda and the statutory licence we pay, we have been able to scan a lot of our reserve collection, the essential reading—for example, articles within periodicals—and it has been accepted beyond belief. We have gone from about 40,000 accesses last year to about 110,000. We have a lot more articles that we are scanning available now online, and we do not duplicate those. So students are coming into the library. They might be viewing something online, they could print it or whatever, but they are no longer going to the shelves in that area, pulling things off and photocopying them. We have seen a change in user patterns.

Ms Benton—This is where we start merging into the teaching and learning and support environment. We use Blackboard, which is a learning management software system. We encourage lecturers to lodge the articles that they are referring to students through the library system, which will clear copyright and do all those sorts of things that they really should be doing, rather than just whacking it up on the learning management system. So we are meshing the two systems together on behalf of the lecturers and providing a package to the students. That is where that synergy between the library and the learning environment happens, and that is why our structure is reflecting that.

Mr Anderson—We have found, particularly in the last five years, that we have had to replace VT100s or DUN terminals, which were just TeX emulators, with full imagers so that students can access online content. Plus we have had to upgrade networks. A lot of our budget in terms of what I would say is our bread and butter has now gone into an ongoing upgrading of our technology, our infrastructure, because there are still an awful lot of students coming on campus. Every year when we do our surveys they still say that there are not enough PCs available. Also, of course, because Newcastle is traditionally a disadvantaged area, we find that not everyone has a PC at home or that facility, so they do come in. We also have a fairly large mature age population coming to universities who have not had the background in using IT that, say, a school leaver has. They take quite a lot of training so that they are comfortable with their

technology. I was talking to a nurse educator s at Gosford hospital who is involved with some community programs that they run for the nursing certificate. She said that some of these people do not even have a microwave at home, so it is really quite challenging for them to be confronted with everything being online—things that we sometimes take for granted.

Ms Benton—There is an enormous inconsistency in literacy levels. The information and technology literacy levels of our student population vary wildly, as does their ability to evaluate information. They may be able to discover it, but their ability to evaluate it and use it properly and usefully in their research and general work does vary, and a lot of effort by library staff goes into attempting to get information literacy embedded into curriculum. They work closely with academics to facilitate that.

Senator MOORE—Is that where the education support unit comes in, in providing that?

Ms Benton—It works both ways. The library staff work with the teaching and learning support people to get out into faculty, and often we find that we have to encourage a somewhat self-sufficient online delivery of information literacy, which is a bit of a circular thing. It is a very difficult thing to sustain and model whereby we are offering equitable information literacy to 22,000 students. This year we have adopted online information literacy modules which step you through from a very basic level of understanding of a PC right through to being able to retrieve information.

Senator MOORE—Did you do it yourself or did you learn from other places that had done similar things?

Ms Benton—The library community is very good at learning from one another but you certainly tailor it to your own need and your own understanding of what your community is. Of course we are surrounded by expert educators particularly in the education and arts faculty and we work very closely with faculties to tweak it to get it right, if you like. Yes, a lot of effort from our staff goes into building that sort of program.

Senator MOORE—Are you finding a comfort level for students who have not got a great deal of IT background? Do you find that they are comfortable in working with library staff to acquire the skills?

Ms Benton—Yes, I would say they find us very approachable. It is always difficult to measure the people who do not find us approachable of course—because we are not approaching them.

Senator MOORE—They cannot fill out the forms that tell you that—

Ms Benton—Exactly. We have a lot of that sort of feedback and the university itself has a lot of mechanisms to monitor and measure how students are experiencing the learning experience. A lot of feedback comes to us outside our stream of activity, which indicates to us that we may or may not be reaching them appropriately. To that end that is what I mean about embedding information in curriculums so that they are exposed to it early. We do pick up things from the help desk when people ring with problems from home, saying that they cannot log on or

whatever the problem is. So there are lots of ways we can pick up how we need to be meeting them.

Senator MOORE—I am always interested in university communities and how the different streams interact. Is there a formal relationship between your university provided services and the community based libraries?

Ms Benton—When you say ‘formal’ I do not think that any area has a really formal arrangement apart from agreements that you may establish on a local level in terms of reciprocal borrowing or whatever it may be—for example, the one we have with TAFE. But in terms of community relationships, we are building good community relationships in Newcastle. We have met with Noelle, the previous speaker, and Gillian from Lake Macquarie on numerous occasions. Certainly our Central Coast campus has good relationships with the local public environment there and there is a lot we can do towards establishing comfort zones for community users and university students. Having said all that, unless we can get to a point where we can establish shared and extended licence agreements—and there is potential in that—we will find ourselves cannoning into the problem, as Greg has already discussed, of authentication, which could prevent the community from using some areas of our databases.

Senator MOORE—So it goes back to that licence issue again.

Mr Anderson—Yes. Publishers get very nervous as soon as we even mention teaching hospitals because they have a view that all the doctors and all the nurses in those hospitals will automatically want to use those same resources. When you have third-year medical students based at the hospital—that is where they actually spend all their time—we need to make sure that they can access resources. We have to convince the publisher that there are authentication processes in place to exclude the other people.

I guess there is a way around that. CIAP serves the hospital sector and the New South Wales Department of Health fairly well but you end up with a different range of services available from the ones that we may offer. There has been some interest, for example, from the Hunter Area Health Service for piggybacking on our ScienceDirect deal with Elsevier. As soon as they are interested, it is a matter of getting the publisher to sit down and work out an equitable agreement that means that the Hunter Area Health Service contribute to the cost of that information. They certainly could not afford what we are paying—nearly three-quarters of a million dollars for a 12-month subscription. It is just beyond their reach.

Senator MOORE—You would be unsurprised that similar comments were made by James Cook University in Cairns and by the University of Queensland and QUT in Brisbane. There are exactly the same issues there so it is an ongoing battle. Does your university offer tertiary studies in the skills around being a librarian?

Mr Anderson—No.

Senator MOORE—Where do you draw your graduates from to work in the university library?

Mr Anderson—The traditional courses are mainly in Sydney and Canberra. However, we do have staff who study by correspondence, so they may go in at the paraprofessional level and end up with a degree, and hopefully snare a position through that process. Lynne and I obtained our qualifications from other regional universities.

Senator MOORE—Do you find any desire to publicise the attraction of your profession to Newcastle graduates or people who are doing other degree courses in Newcastle to try and encourage them into the profession by doing postgraduate work elsewhere?

Ms Benton—At the Central Coast, for example, they attend careers fairs and all those sorts of things to promote their activity. At Newcastle, we would certainly be open to attending those sorts of formal environments but, having said that, so far so good. Newcastle is a city that people hang on to because it is close to Sydney but enjoys the rural environment. It is not difficult to get people to identify the fact that they would like to work in libraries. Also a number of degree courses obviously feed into being a librarian or an information worker, so the pool is really quite comfortable at the moment. Certainly, we would be happy to represent the joys of being a librarian—on a good day.

Mr Anderson—I think our biggest challenge is that we have a lot of qualified staff. I have a shelver who has two masters degrees. We do not have a lot of turnover.

Ms Benton—People in Newcastle work in libraries for a very long time. In fact, if anything, forget the opportunity of a new position and getting in some new blood. It is not that we have a problem with our existing staff; it is that looking for energy that any institution is keen on. I have certainly noticed since I have come back to Newcastle that there is not that movement of staff as much as you would enjoy in Sydney, for example.

Mr Anderson—Also, since 1996 we have reduced our number of positions from about 150 down to 110 full-time equivalents. That has been through a mixture of having changed management and the use of technology. Obviously, if you are buying a lot of content online, you are not having to manage it in the same way that you did with print. There are savings in other areas, so all the time we are having to adjust the way that we do our job.

Ms Benton—Libraries in the past have historically enjoyed a respect from the community: ‘Only librarians would know how to deal with things because it is books and shelves and all those sorts of things.’ Now we are so involved with the online learning environment, we also attract all the mud, if you like, that information technology staff get thrown at them, which is, ‘Surely, you can do it cheaper if you are spending that much money on technology.’ We find ourselves defending the need for skilled staff to be able to manipulate the information that is coming through the pipes. I find that there is this assumption from outside that because we are buying technology, consequently we will not need that number of staff to support it. But of course we do still have a million books to keep on the shelves, and we still have to facilitate the use of our online resources, so we find ourselves arguing new arguments in comparison to our predecessors.

Senator MOORE—Are you confident of the success level of your arguments?

Ms Benton—Sometimes. Operationally our budget is only as big as it is going to get. The university is squeezed, like most universities, and we are required to work within a very tight operational budget.

Senator MOORE—Is there a good relationship between all the university libraries across the country? I know there is an association—there are lots of associations—but is the one between universities effective?

Ms Benton—Yes, I would say it is.

Mr Anderson—I think there is a little concern at the moment with the Group of Eight that certain deals are going on which exclude the others.

Ms Benton—There are always concerns with the Group of Eight.

Mr Anderson—Overall, we have discussions—Lynne attends at least two core meetings a year. We have a tradition of benchmarking and exchanging data. The core statistics have been collected for over 20 years and are all available online. We look at borrowing ideas and information technology as well.

Ms Benton—There are lots of informal relationships across libraries. Our medical librarian visits other medical librarians in universities; the law librarian meets with other law librarians et cetera.

Mr Anderson—We are hosting a visit on Friday from UTS and Wollongong to look at some of our online applications for short loans online and some new search interfaces that we are beta testing that are going to enable students to search across a whole range of databases with one search. We would have about 40 or 50 major databases and they all have their own inquiry language, so we are putting in some software that will search the whole lot at one time.

Senator MOORE—That is a good idea.

Mr Anderson—Yes. And that makes training a lot easier down the track.

ACTING CHAIR—I have a bit of a preamble to my questions. In my view this inquiry does not actually deal with university libraries; it is more to do with public libraries. We have had quite few people from university libraries giving evidence, which is very helpful because in many ways the university libraries are leading the other libraries, not only in terms of the technology and information you need to provide but also in some of the ways you manage that. You also have a restricted audience or users, but we might be looking down the track at public libraries having to face the same situation. In some of the discussion you have had with Senator Moore you have already touched on how you dealt with that and the problems you faced.

I have some questions I would like you to comment on, based on your experience, about how you see the public libraries—the poorer cousins, I suppose—and the sorts of problem they might face and how they should deal with them. Before you do that, just in case somebody actually reads our transcript and might pick up some ideas about the problems you might face or your

complaints, do you want to say something about the difficulties you face and how you see that they should be dealt with? It is a free kick for you.

Ms Benton—I am not quite sure what you are looking for. My perception is that the public libraries—

ACTING CHAIR—No, I want you to talk about the university library to start with. Earlier you were talking about budgetary constraints, licensing constraints and all of that, and the collaboration between universities and other organisations. How do you see that you are going down that track?

Mr Anderson—Historically we have seen our resources as being for the Hunter region. We are the major academic library in the Hunter region and we have always opened our doors to the public. Over the last few years that has been more difficult because when the public come in they cannot access the same resources they had.

ACTING CHAIR—You did operate as a public library before?

Mr Anderson—We have the archives of the university plus those of a lot of the hospitals and industry. We definitely see that we are more than just a university library. We are a regional resource for the community here. We do charge for borrowing if people want to use our collections and take things out the door. But it gets back to the fact that the general public coming in through the library do not have the same access that they enjoyed before the online environment was introduced.

In terms of addressing the public library issues, it is very complex issue. One of the things that I guess would be a great idea would be a similar model to what the core libraries have adopted—some sort of consortia or purchasing arrangements. Some of the resources that we subscribe to would be totally inappropriate for a public library because in certain areas they are really for researchers. But there could be lots of other resources that they could subscribe to, with some assistance in funding, that would make it easier. I know that the public libraries have assisted with access to the Internet for people who do not have that. The university certainly does not offer general Internet access—we had to stop that about two years ago. So they are very important in filling a gap when we can no longer do that.

Ms Benton—Absolutely. And all the issues that we have discussed are entirely applicable to the public library environment; for example, information literacy and technology literacy. There is certainly a role there for them, and it is something that we struggle with. In fact, this question came up only last week: if, as a law librarian, for example, you are halfway through helping somebody with a problem and you discover that it is unrelated to university study—it is a community member who is doing some private research because they are embroiled in a court case—how do you back off and help the queue of students waiting for legitimate help? We do have this feeling that we are there to support and help the community, but obviously our primary clientele deserves our attention as much as possible.

Our perception of the local library environment is that it faces all those issues that we have described, but unless libraries adopt some of the strategies that Greg is talking about we will continue to work well with them but not be able to bridge some of the need very successfully. I

think at the moment we do find ourselves struggling with the load. Our staff want to help, but they are so distracted by all this stuff that we are putting in front of them for the student and staff population of Newcastle University that they are struggling a bit with their community relationships.

ACTING CHAIR—So public libraries would face the same situation, except that they do not have the out that you have—saying, ‘You are not a student; I can’t help you’?

Ms Benton—That is right, although, with respect, they do have a little out. It is not as big an out as ours, but they have an out where, if they discover that they are helping a student, they may well suggest that the student return to his or her institution of learning—TAFE, university, school or whatever—and may find some more specialised help there. It is not that they cannot help at all, of course, because as a public library they are there to help the public, but they can refer them back to their institution of learning, so there is a little out for them there. That is perhaps some common ground that we can explore together, and we have started talking to Newcastle Public Library about that: where is the grey area?

ACTING CHAIR—Should there be some definition of what the public library’s role is? For example, if you are doing research for a court case, and therefore doing something for your personal gain or at least to prevent personal loss, should the public librarian be not obliged to help you? Should there be a proper definition of the role of the public library?

Ms Benton—Librarians are always a bit allergic to putting parameters around our service, and I am sure you would find that more with public librarians than with university librarians. Our training is such that we want to be able to help our clientele to access information. We are all great believers in the fact that a human being should be able to access any information. So librarians would be nervous, I would imagine, about drawing a line around where their service starts and stops. But it may be that collaboratively libraries can find a way of communicating what their primary clientele is. I suspect that that is as far as they would want to go.

Mr Anderson—Because the Internet has so many resources, and people just go and do a search and it is so convenient, it is very hard for us to know whether the information they find is the right information. If someone is sitting at a PC doing all these searches and printing things off, you just wonder. I know that some of our academics are quite concerned by some of the resources that students are referring to in essays. It comes back to what we are talking about as information literacy: being able to retrieve information and use it effectively. Sometimes we just have to stand back a little bit. If people need help in using these services, we know that they will come and ask for it. We do not want to dabble too much in controlling information and the way that they are using it. I think that with the Internet we have lost something—I would not use the word ‘control’. Within our libraries, within the four walls, we used to know the resources we had. Now when someone sits down at a terminal and searches the Internet, they could be searching for anything, and we have to somehow equip them with some skills to separate the rubbish from the stuff that is useful.

Ms Benton—And that certainly goes for public libraries, doesn’t it?

Mr Anderson—Very much so, yes.

Ms Benton—People could equip themselves with some downright dangerous legal advice, really.

ACTING CHAIR—Earlier I raised the issue of a library, particularly a public library, which has a recreational function as well as educational and informational functions. I think everyone would accept that an educational and informational function is a proper function of a public library. A recreational function is a little bit more questionable. How are we to make the split, in terms of public responsibility for providing this service?

Ms Benton—I am going to be a bit difficult and say that I do not really like the idea of a split; I like the idea of complementing each other's service. It is true that it is the business of public libraries to provide recreational reading and support for learning outside formal educational environments, but this often goes to the point where it complements what we are doing. Where recreation stops and scholarly retrieval starts is often quite difficult to define.

ACTING CHAIR—My son is at one of the eight big universities.

Ms Benton—The dreaded eight!

ACTING CHAIR—They have whacking big servers. About a year ago I called him and said, 'What you doing?' He said, 'I am watching *Lord of the Rings II*.' I said, 'How do you watch that?' He said, 'I am downloading it—streaming.'

Ms Benton—We have the same problem.

ACTING CHAIR—I am sure he is watching *Matrix Reloaded* now—maybe he already has.

Senator MOORE—He is studying different film styles.

Ms Benton—We do have film studies.

ACTING CHAIR—I am just saying that if the public library becomes a public access point for the Internet, presumably it will be at a higher service level or download speed than most people can get at home. So that becomes a way to get access to a better connection for recreational use.

Ms Benton—I am not so sure about it being better than you can get at home.

ACTING CHAIR—For what you have to pay.

Ms Benton—A lot of the community have the ability to download large amounts of information at home. It may be that at least at home you can turn it on before you go to bed and let it download while you are in bed whereas if you turn it on at the public library and walk away from it the librarian will come along and flick it off at the end of the day. We have had the same problem in our halls of residence where students have downloaded movies—I think in our case it was *Spiderman*—within half an hour of it coming out in the US. Of course that spiked our Internet use and the students were picked up. We all face these download type problems.

ACTING CHAIR—You must have a smaller server.

Ms Benton—Yes, it is probably smaller than Sydney's. Public libraries, I imagine, will face enormous cost implications for being able to provide that service. We will probably have to face a user-pays system for certain downloads. It is an issue that we all face; it is not something that necessarily swings between organisations.

Mr Anderson—We withdrew public access to the Internet because we implemented a monitoring process where all students—before they accessed any online service, including the Internet—had to register. They have an account with an allocation. It is not actually a quota, but it is monitored. So anyone who exceeds reasonable use is brought in for questioning. Some of that content can be looked at.

Senator MOORE—So students can use the Internet; it is just public Internet usage that you stopped.

Mr Anderson—That is right.

Senator MOORE—I thought that was the case; I just want to clarify it. All students who have their student number to key in have access to the Internet.

Mr Anderson—That is right. We know that a lot of them use the Internet for a whole range of purposes, both recreational and scholarly.

Senator MOORE—'Personal development' is what I like to call it.

ACTING CHAIR—The other issue which I think public libraries will face is training their personnel. How do you see that they will be able to handle this problem? Obviously, university librarians will have greater opportunity for upskilling.

Ms Benton—Yes, we do invest a lot of money in staff development and it is absolutely ongoing. Our staff are exposed to new training opportunities all the time, and public libraries would certainly face exactly the same challenge. Their operational budgets are very constrained and often smaller public libraries have one or two staff in and it would be very difficult to spare them to go away. There are more and more opportunities to learn online, but taking people away from the desk to be able to do something online is always a management problem. But there are lots of shared learning environments and opportunities and there is a lot to be said for being able to support one another.

We have spoken briefly to the Newcastle public library people, for example, about shared staff development opportunities. In fact, Newcastle University library has a good tradition of offering general awareness, and seminars for local librarians and other information professionals to come and talk about similar issues. That is a good opportunity for public librarians to grab. They can pop some staff into the back seat of a seminar that is going on in the local university about a new activity. We might be showcasing our map interface or something. But they have minimal staff and it still does not solve the problem of how they are going to spare those people. We suffer the same problem—on a bigger scale, of course. To us, releasing three people from the desk has just

as much of an impact as releasing one from the public library. But it is the same issue. It is about management.

Mr Anderson—Through our Australian Library and Information Association Hunter regional branch, we ran for many years a technology update which was just showcasing technology that the university had. Also, other libraries would bring different software and there would be Internet training courses, for example. In terms of training the public, this region has been well served. The local public libraries have been the vanguard, if you like, for running training sessions for the public. I know that they have their own networks within the public library associations and they meet on a fairly regular basis. I think they are doing their own things within their own mechanisms as well. It would be wrong to say that the university is the only one that is doing anything in this area.

ACTING CHAIR—I am not suggesting that.

Mr Anderson—In fact, they are doing more.

ACTING CHAIR—Do you think that public libraries—particularly since most of our public libraries are council based—would have the financial resources to keep up with this kind of training and upgrading? In New South Wales, they are 90 per cent local council funded and 10 per cent state funded. I do not know about the other states, but I cannot see them being much more generous than that.

Ms Benton—To a certain extent it would be presumptuous for Greg and I to assume what the operational budgets of the public libraries are, but we are aware of the fact that the State Library offers a lot of mentoring and support for public libraries. I imagine that they tap into that pretty heavily. The other thing is that, to work in a library, you have to be very self-driven and self-motivated to learn on the job. A lot of our experience is not about a formal learning environment. Frankly, Greg and I have got to where we are by—three-quarters of the time—just working it out and teaching one another and our colleagues. I find that our professional staff teach one another. If they have picked up a new skill on a database then the next thing you know they are all talking about how you access this. Surely that would happen in public libraries.

ACTING CHAIR—I thought only senators did that! I have one last question. Do you know who the Group of Eight are? Nobody tells me that.

Mr Anderson—Do you mean which universities they are?

ACTING CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Anderson—They are the sandstones—Queensland, New South Wales, Sydney, Melbourne, Monash, Adelaide and ANU.

ACTING CHAIR—Not the University of WA?

Ms Benton—I think UWA is a very close runner to those, but I do not know if it is formally recognised as being in the Go8.

ACTING CHAIR—And not Tasmania?

Ms Benton—No, not Tasmania.

ACTING CHAIR—It is a very exclusive group. I am surprised that Newcastle offers a full range of disciplines and you are not one of them.

Ms Benton—Our vice-chancellor would be surprised too, but that is another story.

Mr Anderson—I am not sure what sorts of criteria there are. We hear quite regularly that we are the ninth highest funded university for research, but in certain other areas we do not perform so well.

Senator MOORE—In research you are very highly regarded.

Mr Anderson—We have this sort of odd role.

ACTING CHAIR—I am sure your library service is very highly regarded too.

Ms Benton—We would like to think so.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you very much, Ms Benton and Mr Anderson. According to the current schedule, you have the distinction of being the last witnesses in this inquiry. This concludes today's proceedings. I thank Ms Benton and Mr Anderson for their informative presentation.

Committee adjourned at 4.45 p.m.