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House Standing Committee on Education and Training  
Parliament of Australia  
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Subject: Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

Dear Committee members,

In our following submission we would like to address one of the terms of reference: *the future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy*. We believe you may be interested in research we completed in 2009 which had interesting results in terms of the information skills of students arriving at university straight from high school.

The University of Wollongong Library plays a major role in introducing new university students to the academic environment, in particular the role of academic information. The Library is currently heavily involved in the University's plans to improve the transition of school students to university and therefore enhance their chances of success in their subjects.

For over twelve years, new students have had to complete a compulsory unit on information skills. This subject is taught online and must be completed within the first semester of study at UOW. In 2009, the Library began a complete redesign of the subject and devised a range of research opportunities to allow us to ultimately identify the knowledge gaps that needed to be addressed.

One of the first pieces of research was a survey of students as they attended enrolment days. At this point they had very little knowledge of the university, other than information days they may have attended as part of the University's recruitment program. The survey was designed to gauge their level of confidence in engaging with information at a university level and then to test their actual level of skill.

The majority of students displayed well developed computer usage skills and responded to questions with a high level of confidence about their ability to locate different kinds of information. When tested on questions such as how to identify and then locate different types of information such as books and journal articles, the results were poor. Many did not understand what a journal or journal article was and were poor at identifying examples of plagiarism. There was a definite disparity between their level of confidence and their actual ability.

Further focus groups with students part way into their studies reinforced these results. Many noted honestly how little they knew in terms of using libraries and information when first beginning their university studies.

A piece of research which proved very insightful was a session with local high school teacher librarians. The teacher librarians were invited to a presentation of our findings and discussions followed. Some of the insights we gained were quite disturbing and a selection included:

- Libraries in primary schools play a larger role in introducing students to the information environment and information literacy is often embedded in the curriculum. Primary school teacher librarians are very active in inculcating an interest in reading and using information.



- The ongoing development of information skills at high school level did not have a high profile and little importance was placed on these skills by teachers and some principals. Information and communication technology (emphasis on using computers and applications) is included in the curriculum but information literacy skills do not appear to be high on the agenda.
- There is a lack of understanding by teachers of how information skills classes could be embedded within the curriculum and add to student's future capacity to be independent learners. Teacher librarians find it difficult to obtain class time to work with students on information skills, particularly in the packed period of Years 11 and 12. Yet this is the time when students are most often required to do detailed research.
- The support and understanding of the principal is key to how high school libraries fare. There appears to be no direct driver within the curriculum to ensure information skills are provided.
- The majority of high school students would use Wikipedia or Google to locate information on the web. UOW classes provided to some local high schools showed a limited knowledge of getting the best out of internet search engines e.g. using the advanced Google search screen.
- Students have little knowledge of how to evaluate information found on the internet in terms of authority, currency, validity.
- High school libraries hold a very limited printed reference collection due to the emphasis on information on the internet and their printed collections may consist of novels and leisure reading collections.
- Students had limited exposure to suitable full-text journal article databases even though there are a number available freely through local, state and national libraries.
- The filtered system in NSW government schools can severely limit access to relevant internet sources.
- HSC students in NSW are required to complete the plagiarism unit '*HSC – All My Own Work*'. However we understand that schools are allowed to individually set the pass mark to 'satisfactorily complete' the program. For students coming to university, this means that there is great variability in the level of student understanding when applied to the academic environment.

UOW has developed a range of graduate qualities. The institution is committed to developing graduates who are:

***Independent learners***

*Engage with new ideas and ways of thinking and critically analyse issues. Seek to extend knowledge through ongoing research, enquiry and reflection. Find and evaluate information, using a variety of sources and technologies. Acknowledge the work and ideas of others.*

The knowledge gained through our research was used to develop *StartSmart: Essential Academic Information Skills*, an online subject comprising a series of modules covering developing a research strategy, selecting an appropriate information source, searching skills for material in print and electronic formats, understanding reading lists provided by academic staff and academic integrity (avoiding plagiarism). *StartSmart* is freely available at:

<http://www.uow.edu.au/student/services/fye/resources/startsmart/index.html>

*StartSmart* does not attempt to cover every possible information skill required at university. It does aim to provide beginning students with the confidence to address their first assignments within the first weeks of the semester and to feel comfortable with the academic information environment.

At the university level, Library staff are sympathetic to the issues facing high school teacher librarians. It is difficult to have academic staff give up valuable lecture or tutorial time for information skills classes. Where this works well, it is due to partnerships between the relevant librarian and academic in designing learning experiences that enhance students' abilities to locate and use relevant information in order to be successful in a particular assignment.

Outstanding examples occur where the faculty has taken the time to map graduate qualities to the curriculum and selected a number of specific subjects and assignments that lend themselves to



developing information skills gradually over the years of study e.g. one basic first year subject, an exploratory second year subject, a third year major report subject.

Education departments specify learning outcomes within the high school curriculum. We do not believe that high school libraries and the teacher librarians are embedded sufficiently to ensure that the majority of students leaving high school actually have the skills they confidently believe themselves to possess. Governments spend money on providing library facilities at high schools, staffed by postgraduate level trained professional teacher librarians. Our research shows that these facilities appear to be underutilised, therefore, affecting the literacy outcomes of students, whether they go on to tertiary education or into jobs in the community.

Yours sincerely,

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