

NATIONAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION  
AND TRAINING RESEARCH PROGRAM

## RESEARCH REPORT

# Public spaces – private places: private registered training organisations and information structure

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*Mary Carroll*

SCHOOL OF INFORMATION STUDIES  
CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY



Australian Government  
Department of Industry





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# About the research

## *Public spaces – private places: private registered training organisations and information infrastructure*

Mary Carroll, Charles Sturt University

Little research has been conducted on the provision of information infrastructure (such as access to libraries and information resources) in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. Its use, and the needs of students for such services, is relatively unknown. While these services have been integral to public training organisations, this is not the case for private registered training organisations (RTOs).

This research is a preliminary investigation into the use of public libraries by students of private registered training organisations. The aim of this modest study was to gain some insight into how students of these organisations use public library resources, and the implications for the libraries.

### Key messages

- The public library may be the only point of access for essential educational support services for many VET students attending private registered training organisations. However, students with access to both a library at their registered training organisation and a public library often used those resources differently.
- Partnerships between public libraries and training organisations can have positive outcomes if structured collaboratively and for mutual advantage.
- Staffing may be the most critical factor to consider in providing information infrastructure in training organisations.
- There are no national data on information infrastructure in the VET sector or the impact of infrastructure on training outcomes. This is a gap in our understanding of the sector.

Rod Camm  
Managing Director, NCVET

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# Executive summary

*Public spaces – private places: private registered training organisations and information infrastructure* is a small-scale study investigating access to information infrastructure and the use of public libraries by private registered training organisations (RTOs) and their students in Australia. The term 'information infrastructure' encompasses selected support services, including access to libraries and resources, media and information literacy training and support from professional staff. To date there has been very little research into the provision of literacy training and into information infrastructure in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, its use, or the needs of students for such structures and services. This study examines the formal and informal use of selected public libraries by private registered training organisations and their students to support program delivery in a number of selected locations. It also aims to explore the impact, both perceived and actual, of such usage on the public libraries.

To inform debate about the provision of information infrastructure in the training context a greater understanding of its contribution and role in training delivery, lifelong learning and high-quality outcomes is needed. There is also a need for a better understanding of the requirements of VET students for such infrastructure and its impact on training outcomes. While this current study is exploratory and therefore narrow in focus, it is underpinned by these broader questions in the context of an increasingly digital environment. The key research question for this study was: What are the implications for publicly funded library services of the unregulated provision of information infrastructure by private registered training organisations?

The study used multiple research methods. A literature review places the research in its historical and contemporary context and examines the place of information infrastructure in Australia's VET environment. It also provides an overview of the public library environment in Australia and offers insight into this sector. A small survey of students who attended private registered training organisations was conducted. The survey sought to determine the information infrastructure provided by the students' training organisation and the resources available, the usage made of such infrastructure when available and the use students made of public libraries. Finally, interviews were conducted with public library staff in selected locations (based in Melbourne and Adelaide) to investigate the usage of public libraries by students at private training organisations and the perceived impact of such usage. Examples of synergies and opportunities for partnerships were also sought, as were examples of the services offered to cater for these students.

Thirty students responded to the student survey. The small size of the survey means that the findings are not representative of the broader population. However, they do provide some insight into the use of libraries by these students. The survey found that 30% of the respondents had a library in their training organisation. As a comparison, an environmental scan of 75 identified private registered training organisations in the cities of Melbourne, Greater Bendigo and Adelaide indicated that 6.5% had a library.

The most commonly reported use of the learning institution's library was 'help in finding information' (87.5%), which is interesting, given that only 22% reported that the library had a librarian or similar person in charge of that area. Students appeared to make different uses of their public and learning institution libraries when they had access to both services, with greater use made of public libraries for recreational material than for instructional materials or support. Public library spaces were also popular with the survey respondents as places for quiet study. For survey

respondents, the presence of a staff member in a library was an important element in the active use of the facility.

The interviews with public library staff revealed that they were aware that students of private registered training organisations were making use of their library services to support aspects of their study, including through organised tours and training sessions, library registration information and assistance to individuals and groups. The library staff were also aware that some of these students had no access to these services in their home organisation. The interview responses from library staff members highlighted concerns about student and registered training organisation use of their resources, staff and facilities, although they noted that this situation also presented opportunities. This in turn provided insight into the practical implications for public libraries of this usage.

Library staff concerns included the use of meeting and activity rooms and other facilities for both official and unofficial purposes, particularly when used for profit. Another concern was the increasing demand for tours and the training sessions requested by providers, placing a considerable strain on staff resources.

Despite the concerns, some benefits were highlighted by library staff, with examples of positive synergies between the libraries and private training organisations identified. These included: the hire of training space, thus providing revenue for the library; the sub-contracting of a registered training organisation to deliver skills training in the library; and the contribution made by these students to the library 'door count'. Partnerships between public libraries and training organisations can have positive outcomes if structured collaboratively and for mutual advantage

A number of questions also emerged from the study that suggest opportunities and directions for further research. There are no national data collections of information infrastructure or research into the impact of information infrastructure on training outcomes in the VET sector. This is a gap in our understanding of the sector. The issues requiring investigation include the need to gather more extensive national data on information infrastructure within both the private and public VET sectors, along with research to understand the impact of such infrastructure on the outcomes of vocational education and training.

# Introduction

The need to better address industry and individual demands for skills has seen a shift away from the traditional publicly funded model for the delivery of vocational education and training in Australia. Amongst the responses to this contemporary education and training environment has been an expansion in the number of private registered training organisations delivering vocational education and training and the concomitant establishment of regulatory standards, including the Standards for NVR Registered Training Organisations 2011 (Commonwealth of Australia 2011a, 2011b) to ensure the ongoing quality of training delivery across both the public and private sectors. Education and training delivery has also undergone transformation, with an increasing shift towards online education and workplace training and away from traditional face-to-face delivery. One consequence of these changes is that an increasing number of VET students are being educated in the workplace and/or by private training providers and/or online. Students undertaking their education and training by these methods are also increasingly operating outside the traditional service structures, including information infrastructure, of public training institutions. The term 'information infrastructure' includes the selected support services identified in the Standards for NVR Registered Training Organisations 2011 (Commonwealth of Australia 2011b, p.8) and access to libraries and learning resource centres, information resources, information literacy training, professional information staff, information technology resources and IT (information technology) support.

In establishing Australia's publicly funded TAFE (technical and further education) colleges in the 1970s this information infrastructure was seen as central to the overall training experience and was established to support and extend this experience, to enhance opportunities for lifelong learning and to contribute to the broader education of the individual to enable them to contribute more fully as citizens (the Kangan Report; Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974). The provision of information infrastructure has traditionally been embedded in the training agenda through the provision and staffing of a network of libraries/educational resource centres (alternatively called learning resource centres, curriculum resource centres or learning commons) in public training organisations.

Nationally and internationally, access to information infrastructure has been considered an important component in supporting the ongoing competitive advantage and sustainability of individuals in the workplace and their long-term employability (UNESCO 2005), with this access seen to enhance opportunities for the development of media and information literacies. These literacies are considered critical to an individual's capacity to effectively meet their social, occupational and educational goals in a fluid and rapidly changing digital world (UNESCO 2005). Information and digital literacies are considered to be the competencies that enable individuals to navigate the evolving home and work environments in a sustainable way as well as encourage lifelong learning, and they are linked to access to adequate information infrastructure (Lloyd 2010; Grizzle et al. 2013). Concerns over equality of opportunity are seen to be addressed through access to free publicly funded information infrastructure, thus contributing to social capital (Ferguson 2012). Well-resourced and appropriately designed information infrastructure and expert staff are considered key contributors to: the development of these outcomes; the promotion of concepts such as participatory citizenship; an understanding of the current and emerging digital information landscapes; and the formation of the information-literate person (Australian Library and Information Association 2013; Debono 2012; Lloyd 2010). The provision of this infrastructure for many students in all sectors has traditionally been through access to purpose-built and professionally staffed libraries in the students' educational institution. However, little is known about the current scope of such infrastructure in the

contemporary VET system and, more specifically, amongst private registered training organisations. Lack of adequate student access to such infrastructure may have implications for training outcomes and for preparing individuals for employment in the rapidly changing global landscape. It may also place demands on public resources such as public libraries as they are asked to meet the growing demand of an increasing private training sector without the information infrastructure of their public counterparts. A lack of information infrastructure may shift the responsibility for the provision of these services to the public purse through organisations such as public libraries, a possibility that raises questions about the extent of such demand; the impact on public libraries and their capacity to meet the needs of their broader community from increased demand of this type; and the consequent stress on the existing facilities and services. It also raises the question of who is responsible for adequate infrastructure and service provision and whether this places public providers such as TAFE at a competitive disadvantage. There may also be identifiable benefits for partnerships between public libraries and training providers, including: extending the reach and impact of the training beyond the formal setting; a new source of income for the libraries involved; and enhancing the ability of training organisations to reach new and/or non-traditional audiences.

The Australian Government's Standards for NVR Registered Training Organisations 2011 includes the provision of such infrastructure as part of the obligations of training organisations for registration (Commonwealth of Australia 2011b); yet minimum standards for the scope of such services and the obligations of registered training organisations remain unclear and/or undefined. While the requirement for the provision of this infrastructure has been embedded in the institutional structures of public training organisations, there are almost no data at a national level on the state of such information infrastructure in either the public or private VET sectors in Australia. Statistical data for VET libraries are available in the public sector at an institutional level and in Victoria (Victorian Association of TAFE Libraries 2012) at a state level. The most recent data currently available for public VET in Victoria (2009) indicates 74 staffed library locations at 17 TAFE colleges and dual-sector universities, staffed by approximately 250 full-time equivalent staff (Victorian Association of TAFE Libraries 2011). This represents a significant investment in the resourcing of vocational education and training in this sector.

This lack of national data contrasts with the higher education (HE) sector, which has been collecting such data since 1953 to provide benchmarks and minimum standards for collections, facilities, staffing, access and usage (Council of Australian University Librarians 2012). Public libraries also view such data as critical to the delivery of services and a means of benchmarking and measuring impact and value. Recent public library reports in Victoria (Public Libraries Victoria Network et al. 2011), Queensland (State Library of Queensland et al. 2012) and New South Wales (JL Management Services Pty Ltd et al. 2012) have examined the social and economic capital contributed by public libraries to the community and have addressed the public library's role in providing equality of opportunity, access to technology and information literacy and lifelong learning.

In the VET context, a study of the characteristics of Australian private training organisations reported that (with the exception of the adult/community sector): fewer than half of the respondent private organisations provided computer facilities; 34% provided access to study space; and 30% provided library facilities (Harris, Simons & McCarthy 2006, p.10). This suggests the possibility of a large student body not being catered for in terms of the services that provide the information access, study space, computer access, resources, and informal and formal information literacy education opportunities necessary for continued employability and lifelong learning (Lloyd 2010). This also presents a larger question for quality education and training provision in relation to the continued role and value of these services in contemporary training agendas. To understand fully the place of this

infrastructure in producing high-quality outcomes more needs to be known about the current state of this infrastructure in the public and private sectors. Consideration also needs to be given to the regulatory standards which oversee such provision and any long-term impact of not providing adequately for the information needs of VET participants.

Many factors contribute to equitable and quality outcomes in the provision of education and training. This research asks questions about the impact of varying levels of information infrastructure provision by institutions on both students and public libraries and examines the relationship between this provision – or lack of – and public libraries. The investigation also raises questions about the expectations for public and private providers to deliver equitable outcomes and the long-term social and educational implications of a lack of adequate information infrastructure in these institutions. Research conducted in the school sector suggests that the extent of provision of information infrastructure has an impact on educational outcomes (Lonsdale 2003; Combes 2008; Lance & Hofschire 2012). This body of research suggests that inadequate provision may mean fewer opportunities to develop the skills for navigating an increasingly complex information environment, particularly amongst those who already face social or economic disadvantage and a lack of access to the resources and technologies that enhance lifelong employability, career change and learning. It can be argued that, in order to provide access, equity and the service necessary for the delivery of long-term and sustainable benefit to VET participants, consideration should be given to the provision of information infrastructure such as libraries for VET institutions.

## Focus of the research

This research is an exploratory investigation into the current provision of information infrastructure and associated services by private training organisations delivering publicly funded training. This includes the impact of, and the continued need for, information infrastructure such as libraries in the delivery of high-quality education and training, and the obligations of education and training providers to offer these support services. It explores the use of public libraries by students attending private registered training organisations.

The key research question addressed in the study was:

- What are implications for publicly funded library services of the unregulated provision of information infrastructure by private registered training organisations?

A number of related questions were identified:

- What are the implications for vocational education and training from the wider research concerning the impact of information access and information literacy for equity, social disadvantage and lifelong learning?
- What does publicly available information indicate about the current state of information resources and access for clients of private registered training organisations?
- How does the provision of information infrastructure by private registered training organisations compare with that of the publicly funded VET sector such as TAFE colleges?
- Are there models of collaborative practice between public and private providers and organisations which may act as templates for the future provision of information infrastructure by private registered training organisations?

This research places the provision of information infrastructure in its historical context to establish its place in vocational education and training and raises questions about the continuing value placed on

such infrastructure. It does this through an examination of the provision of access to critical information infrastructure for students enrolled in privately managed registered training organisations. It considers the role played by publicly funded institutions such as public libraries in supporting the information needs of these students. During this process the potential cost of inadequate provision will also be considered. It is intended that this research will inform further research into the provision of information infrastructure, information access and information education by private registered training organisations and will include access to these services by students studying by distance, those living in remote and regional areas and those undertaking work-based traineeships and apprenticeships.

# Review of the literature

## Historical context

Since the mid-nineteenth century the provision of information infrastructure has been considered a key element in the vocational training compact and essential to a sustainable and productive working life. This view reflects an historic relationship both nationally and internationally between access to information and the provision of adult and vocational education. In countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia and Great Britain, it also reflects the inextricably entwined development of concepts such as lifelong learning and the provision of library and information services and support (Black, Pepper & Bagshaw 2009; Walker 2013; White 1976). This relationship has its origins in the impact of industrialisation on the traditional vocational and trades model of the nineteenth century. As the means of training moved away from small units of production and apprenticeships to large-scale labour and industry, the responsibility for providing the venues and resources for trade education shifted from the direct responsibility of the single craftsman or workshop (White 1976, p.13). A vacuum was created in how workers were to educate themselves and in the means of acquiring the knowledge and resources needed for the emerging class of tradesmen and mechanics. In these new industrial environments libraries such as those in the mechanics institutes and trade, apprentice and mercantile libraries were established to fill the vacuum and to provide what George Emerson (1827) called 'knowledge of a kind to be directly useful to them in their daily pursuits'. Libraries were promoted in industrial societies throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a means by which the average wage earner could gain access to, amongst other things, the technical manuals and books necessary to ensure their 'mastery of production' (Ditzion 1940, p.205) and also to act as a repository or 'memory of technology' (Augst 2001, p.16). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries libraries increasingly became seen as a conduit for lifelong learning and a means by which opportunity for education and self-advancement could be provided. In the early twentieth century industrialists and philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie in the United States were to actively promote libraries as 'ladders upon which the aspiring could arise' (Carnegie 1901, p.18). Libraries are viewed by commentators such as Ditzion (1939), Walker (2013), White (1976) and others as being the foundation upon which vocational training institutions have developed.

## Australian VET and information infrastructure

In Australia the provision of library and information services is an integral element in the delivery of publicly funded training and further education. From the earliest days of the penal settlements, where libraries were provided to both teach convicts basic literacy and provide them with 'useful knowledge' (Carroll 2013), to contemporary TAFE institutions, the provision of library resources has been seen as essential to the training compact. Since the 1970s such access and support has been viewed as a fundamental prerequisite for high-quality training and education in Australia's TAFE sector. Following the release of the watershed Kangan Report, *TAFE in Australia: report on needs in technical and further education* in 1974 (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974), libraries were seen as part of what Batrouney calls the 'powerful traditions of TAFE — the amelioration of disadvantage, eclectic curricula, nation building, citizenship, utilitarian outcomes' (Batrouney in Rushbrook 1997, p.2) The Kangan Report was to influence the direction of technical and further education for many decades, with its argument that the provision of libraries and other information infrastructure was an essential and critical factor in the construction of a training agenda which, while meeting the needs of industry, also enhanced the educational prospects of the individual and provided

opportunities for continuing and lifelong learning. Explicit in this is the provision of adequate access to resources, expertise and training to maximise opportunities for all. Library provision and the training of library professionals feature prominently in this report, with ten of the 31 recommendations relating to libraries and information infrastructure. The report described the library (or learning resource centre) as central to the delivery of vocational training stating:

The activities of the college centre [CRC] should rest on the propositions: first, that college libraries constitute a natural core for their activities; second, that the quality of the learning process is strongly influenced by the range and quality of services available in or from resource centres; third, that to the extent that colleges are prepared to accept a substitute for the traditional formal teaching environment the CRCs will grow in importance for self directed learning. CRCs should provide for a range of learning aids, and for output of multi media materials including library books, periodicals, audio tapes, video tapes, films and transparencies.

(Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, p.82)

The report recommended funding for library staff and resources, capital works and training at ten per cent of the total budget (see figure 1). The provision of information infrastructure was to become an integral part of Australia's TAFE system, with libraries embedded in the TAFE learning and teaching system in the expectation that they would not only supply resources but would also become part of the educational and training process.

## The contemporary context

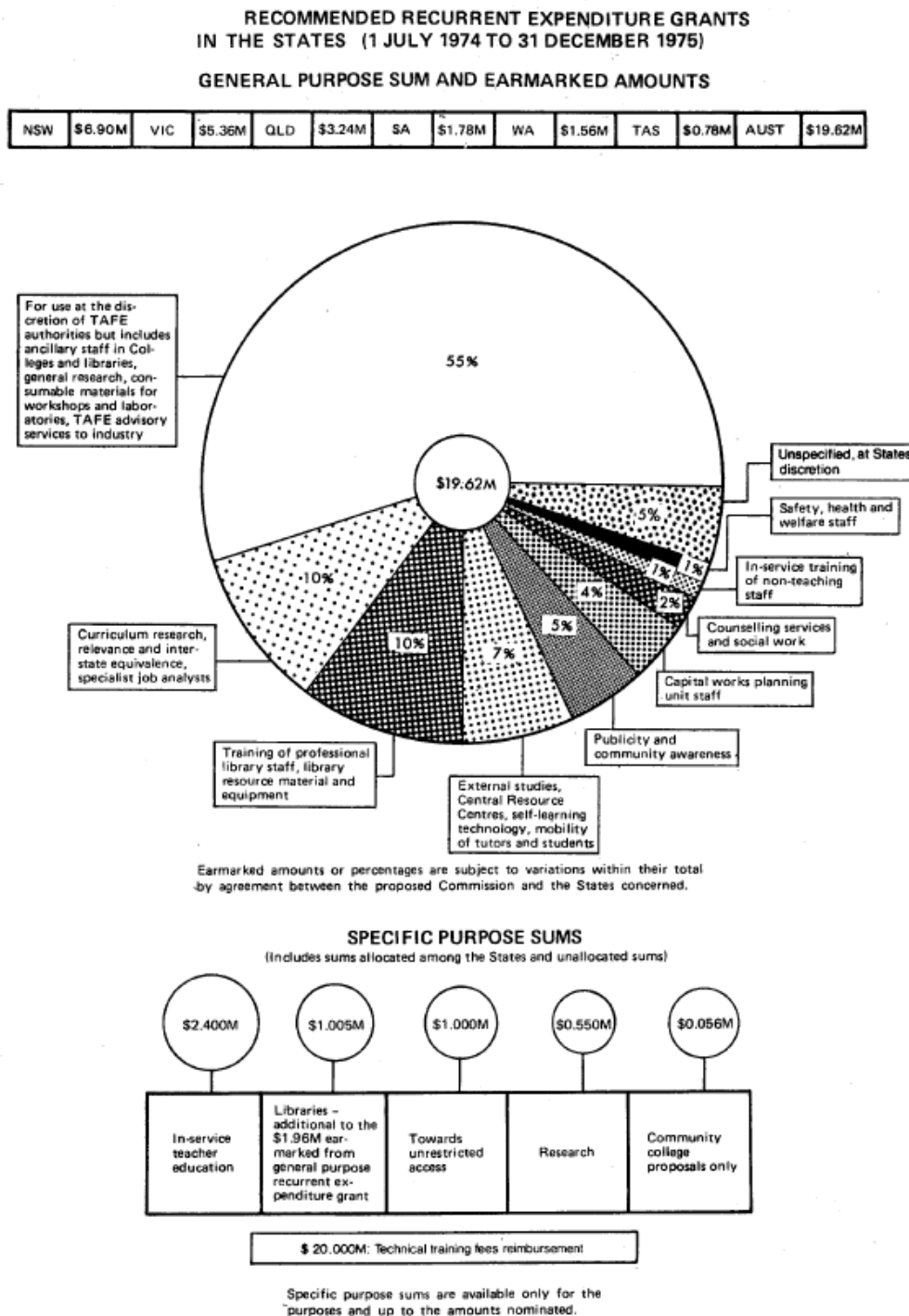
Reflecting the historic imperative to support not just the needs of industry but also the development of the individual and their capacity for lifelong learning, the delivery of training in Australia's TAFE system has traditionally been supported by an established and dedicated information infrastructure. This infrastructure focused on supporting the immediate technical knowledge needed for day-to-day practice as well as on the development of broader skills such as information literacy, which would sustain employability and encourage lifelong learning. This infrastructure, comprising both access to resources and the expertise and support of information professionals, has long been considered an integral part of the education and training experience, being included in organisational budgets and benchmarked against the training objectives of the organisation. Ideological shifts away from this construction of Australia's training agenda from the 1990s onwards have seen an environment in which Australian vocational education and training has increasingly reflected an economic and industrial agenda. These changes in the nature of the educational landscape and the shift in the location and delivery mode of training raise questions about the extent of, and need for, continued support for information infrastructure and services for all students across the VET sector. In turn, our response to such questions highlights attitudes towards the purpose and expected outcomes of training and raises further questions about training pedagogy and the place of the individual in such delivery.

In response to the changing workplace environment and changes in government agendas, there has been an expansion in the number of private registered training organisations delivering vocational education and training in a variety of fields and contexts over the last decade. Little is known however about the information infrastructure provided by private training organisations to support students, specifically its extent; how many students are operating without the infrastructure traditionally provided by Australian TAFE colleges; and the implications for students and other organisations such as public or academic libraries of the lack of access to adequate levels of information infrastructure. Anecdotal evidence from public and academic librarians suggests that large numbers of private training organisation students use public libraries and traditional educational



libraries, such as those of TAFE institutes and universities, as their place of study. This remains anecdotal and there has been no supporting research which examines these claims. If this is the case, then it may be that increased demand is being placed on an already often overstretched public resource – the public library – meaning that scarce resources, including information infrastructure, are being allocated beyond the barriers of the remit of the traditional public library service.

Figure 1 Recommended recurrent expenditure grants as shown in the 1974 Kangan Report



Source: Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education (1974, p.xlvi).

## Public libraries in Australia

To frame the possible impact of the use of public libraries by students attending private training organisations the context of the contemporary public library needs to be understood. Despite community perceptions of a decline in books, reading and library usage, the *Australian public libraries statistical report 2011–12* (National & State Libraries Australasia 2013, p.8) indicates an increase in items lent from public libraries over the last five years and an expansion in the services and materials provided. The extent of usage and service provision is outlined in this report and indicates for Australia:

- 1505 public library service points with 1429 fixed-point libraries and 76 mobile libraries
- one public library service point for every 15 000 people
- almost 181 million items lent to 10 million members of Australia's public libraries
- over 110 million customer visits annually, or more than nine million per month
- more than 40 million items (1.8 items per person) made available for the use of the community and over \$123 million spent on ensuring that these collections remain up to date and relevant (more than half the collections are less than five years old) (National & State Libraries Australasia 2013, p.3).

Almost 50% of the population belongs to a library and many more Australians use libraries for study, reading and research (Australian Library and Information Association 2011). Changing economic and social conditions have also seen the decline of civic infrastructure in many communities, with libraries increasingly acting as de facto community gathering places and service points. Robert Knight (2000, pp.273–4) pointed out that in rural situations a library is 'often the one stable agent that remains in a community [as a] natural meeting place for people [and] a de facto service provider for technology access, community information, learning support, council business, and much more'. This is increasingly true in both rural and urban contexts.

The central policies and principles under which public libraries operate is a pivotal aspect of this research. Public libraries adhere to principles whereby they have a professional obligation to cater for all members of the community. The principles under which they operate include that:

Each member of the Australian community has an equal right to public library and information services regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, disability, geographic location, social status, economic status and educational attainment.

(Australian Library and Information Association 2009)

This obligation, as will be seen in some of the interviews conducted for this study, creates pressure on public libraries to provide services to all users. The tension between available resources and increased need places a spiralling demand on public libraries in Australia.

# Methods and findings

This study investigated the use of public libraries to support program delivery by private registered training organisations and their students in a number of locations in Australia. Data were collected through a survey of students and interviews with library staff.

## Interviews with library staff

The interviews aimed to explore the perceptions and knowledge of public library staff including:

- their recognition and identification of private registered training organisation students
- examples of programs and services provided to cater for this group if identified
- any identified known implications of the use of their services by this user group.

Using the *Public library directory* (2013), two capital cities, one large suburban location and one large regional city were selected for interviews with library staff. These locations were considered to provide a number of public library types, large student populations and a variety of educational institutions, including private training organisations.

- The locations of libraries to be targeted for interviews were:
  - Melbourne inner city, Victoria
  - Adelaide inner city, South Australia.

As public library services often have a number of branches in their service and some public library services cross municipal and suburban boundaries, a further multi-branch library service was identified as suitable for recruiting library staff for interview. The library service selected was a public library network in Melbourne's northern suburbs. It was also considered appropriate to include a regional city with a large regional library network. The library location selected for this was a large regional centre in northern Victoria. The profiles of the public library services chosen for interview recruitment can be seen in table 1.

Once interview locations had been identified, an environmental scan of the websites of 75 private providers in these locations was conducted for any mention of libraries or other information services attached to their organisation. The library profiles and environmental scan provided background and context for the interviews. The results of this scan can be seen in table 2.

Library staff with responsibility for public access, public programs or the relevant policy were identified in the selected library services in the identified locations and invited to participate in the research. Participation was voluntary with six staff members initially agreeing to be interviewed, while a further participant was later recruited after being recommended by other participants.

**Table 1 Profiles of library services selected for interview**

Library service type	Branches	Characteristics
A Suburban library service, Victoria	5	Located in culturally diverse community 114 000 residents 57 456 members Average 2500 visits a day, or 736 000 annually More than 1.1 million items borrowed annually
B Inner-city library service, Victoria	5	100 611 residents, with 46% of these being students 997 810 visits in 2010–11 1 261 808 loans in 2010–11
C Inner-city library service, South Australia	4	22 000 residents 535 000 visits 2011–12 260 000 online visits 2011–12 913 000 loans 2011–12
D Large state library service	1	Responsible for delivering service in the state and nationally
E Regional library service, Victoria	10 plus mobile services	Covers an area of 12 979 square kilometres 175 000 residents 982 000 physical visits per year 1.6 million loans per year

**Table 2 Online presence of a library at identified private training providers**

State	No. of RTOs	No. with online library presence
Victoria	66	5
South Australia	10	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>5</b>

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with seven library staff members holding various roles and responsibilities from the five library services as outlined in see table 1. Participants were provided with an information statement, consent form and interview guide prior to the interviews. The interview guide used by the researcher contained a list of open-ended questions, which were informed by the critical literature review and the key research question. Interviews were also recorded after consent was received from participants. The interview responses were analysed for keywords and themes.

## Identification of the students

One concern throughout the study had been that the library staff interviewed would not be able to clearly identify the cohort of students the study was interested in. This proved not to be the case and the interview participants were uniformly able to identify the relevant groups of students, based on personal or professional interaction with the students. This identification was mostly informal, as none of the library services collected data on this study's target student group. Students were normally identified by staff through contact with them via the day-to-day activities of the workplace. Such activities included assisting with assignments and research, conducting tours of the library for the registered training organisation, and assisting students with technology and other requests. One participant, reflecting the anecdotal evidence, summed up the overall responses received by stating that while they [private registered training organisation students] were:

Not specifically identified as a user group [by the library] ... the library is very aware that they are in the library and are using the physical and electronic resources. (Respondent no.2)

Most visible to the libraries and mentioned in all interviews were students attending 'language' colleges. One participant claimed that these students were:

Highly visible in the libraries using the desks and WiFi, and as a meeting place. (Respondent no.1)

Students from the language colleges were seen as more easily identifiable and as placing very high demands on resources such as the IELTS<sup>1</sup> material dealing with English language programs and also university entry materials. These students were often identified through informal contact or, in a number of instances, formal contact between the colleges and the library service. Group tours, library information sessions and database training were some of the contact events mentioned by a number of the interviewees. Examples were also given of large class groups being brought unannounced to the library so that the students could join the library. All seven interviewees commented on the high demand this aspect of service placed on staff, the budget and collections. Concern was also expressed by a number of the participants about the sustainability of such service. All participants saw demand in this area as extremely high; in one case this demand has led to the appointment of a staff member dedicated to maintaining the language collection and liaising 'directly with the colleges'. Other ways by which the student group was identified by the libraries was through individual attendance at the conversation and tutorial classes offered by the library service, involvement in formal training programs delivered in the library by community and other providers, including local TAFE colleges, and through formal and informal partnership programs with training providers. The range of activities and programs were in some cases specifically targeted to cater for these groups and in other instances were taken up incidentally by the students.

The range of activities cited included:

- conversation groups facilitated by volunteers specifically for international students
- library tours, some of which involved up to 30 students attempting to join, as in one example. In this case the library was trying 'to set up an arrangement with the college involved to avoid big groups' (Respondent no.2)
- catalog training
- introduction to databases, specifically aimed at the course they were studying and arranged by the college
- preparation of material for courses delivered by particular providers
- the use of space for tutorials and exams by the providers
- storage of materials for use by the students because there was no library for item storage at the home institution
- literacy programs
- adult education classes
- partnership programs with a variety of educational organisations including TAFE institutes, universities, training providers, including community providers.

## Policy and practice

Emerging from all the interviews was an innate three-way tension between the everyday practice of catering for often diverse and demanding groups, their professional obligations and standards, and the

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<sup>1</sup> IELTS = International English Language Testing System.

pressures associated with funding and budgetary requirements. Clearly articulated by all interviewees were the imperatives of the public library system and their own professional and social obligations to cater for all patrons, regardless of need. This reflects the professionally articulated mission of public library services and, at an individual level, the professional policy and standards which govern public library practice and librarians in general. This view is perhaps best summed up in the words of one interviewee from a large inner-city library service who stated:

The libraries love having the students. They don't place any extra demand on the library staff, they don't require assistance. They only want a place to come and the public libraries see themselves as providing this service. (Respondent no.5)

Another related the community obligations inherent in their role stating that:

If the private colleges that these students are working with are not providing them with learning support by providing them with a library and learning opportunities, then the ... Library Service kind of has to pick it up, because if we're not doing it, then who is doing it and how are we actually building the knowledge city that the City of ... has pinned as a strategic activity for them? (Respondent no.2)

The tension between practices and policy is perhaps summed up by one interviewee who comments that:

Staff might feel that the training organisations should be providing better infrastructure for their students, but the official line would be that they are very welcome and to be encouraged. (Respondent no.4)

The link between the strategic directions of larger organisations such as councils and their affiliated public library was something that was mentioned by more than one of the participants. It was also often linked to comments about budgetary pressures and the need to be seen to be of value in the community. These concerns reflect the public library's place as one component in a much larger and more complex organisation and as part of a larger approach to community services. On a practical note, the funding of library services is often contingent on usage and the presence of students is seen as an advantage, as funding is based on 'door count', despite the pressures this may place on the library's services. This tension between budgetary concerns and the need for students to use the library and the pressures this creates for staff and services is apparent in the interview responses. A number of those interviewed made specific comments on this aspect of the service, with one interviewee noting:

The library would like as many students to come in as possible. Our funding is based on door count, so we want as many people to come as possible. (Respondent no.4)

Another notes:

Students are seen as a bonus to the library as they are 'people through the door' and people using the resources, which is good for the stats. (Respondent no.3)

Yet another stated:

In ... libraries we know that one of their roles is to support international students and students from the private sector. This is not articulated as 'this is a problem'; it is articulated as a part of a strategic framework and an identified role that needs to be funded. (Respondent no.2)

On a much more personal note, one of the participants who managed public programs for their library service had this to say about the motivation behind some of their programs:

[The library is] conscious that students from private colleges do not have the same opportunities for social and community interaction that students at the big public universities benefit from. We are aware that these students are vulnerable to becoming isolated and see the library as being able to offer 'an almost pastoral care role' and to give them a sense of being connected to their world and having a sense of belonging. (Respondent no.2)

## Tensions, concerns and benefits

A number of themes emerged from the responses, summarised as the desire to provide more effective services, for more staff or for increased budgets.

The consistent themes that emerged were:

- the use of the library to deliver training programs such as those for people from non-English speaking backgrounds in partnership with training or government organisations or as a library service-based initiative
- examples of other formal and informal partnerships between registered training organisations and library services to enhance the effectiveness of the library service and provide further opportunities for the training organisation
- the use of library spaces for delivering unofficial or unsanctioned private tutorial and training delivery – usually commercially
- the stresses on public library resources, including:
  - strains on technology resources
  - usage and access of IELTS and ESL (English as a second language) materials
  - use of space for wireless access
- the implications and pressures for the wider community of the use of the library by the registered training organisation students, including not being able to use the services and facilities
- the use of the library as a meeting or 'third' place.

Some of these were of particular concern to the participants and were the uses of meeting/activity rooms and other facilities for both official and unofficial purposes. Libraries make available where possible rooms for use by members of the community for events such as group activities and meetings, homework clubs and other not-for-profit activities of benefit to the community. The use of such rooms for profit or in unsanctioned ways was mentioned in a number of the interviews and was often linked to a level of unease amongst staff over high volume usage and demands on staff and facilities at no cost to the private providers. The use of meeting rooms for tutorials and training by outside agencies was seen to interfere with the delivery of library programs and other activities.

Library tours were mentioned by some of the interviewees as another point of tension. The increasing demand for such tours was drawing staff away from day-to-day service delivery, with frequent requests by one provider for ever-more tours and training sessions placing considerable strain on the staff time of one library. The participant noted this, stating:

Education librarians are the ones giving the tours, and this takes them away from their other duties such as ref work, desk shifts. (Respondent no.4)

Describing such tours, the same participant relates the workload associated with such tours:

Other RTOs also call up on an ad hoc basis to request tours. Each tour gets assigned a librarian and they receive a 45 minute tour and instruction on the catalogue and introduction to resources available. These tours get requested every six weeks and the library assumes this pattern matches the teaching periods of the RTOs. (Respondent no.4)

And on the impact on the library:

The tours are a drain on the staffing, so there is a policy to limit how many tours will be run each month to free up staff. (Respondent no.4)

The issue of infrastructure, internet access, computer facilities and space generally was the overarching concern of the interviewees.

The need for further space, increased access to WiFi and resources was consistently attributed to the influx of students into the space. This was not specifically the 'college' students and examples were given of other groups, including those studying by distance and at other institutions. The pressures were of great concern, with many responses focused on this issue. Four of those interviewed outlined plans for the library to either increase its physical space or build new branches to cater for this demand. Two participants noted that the primary motivation for a new, larger service was student demand. In the words of one:

The demand by students far exceeds what we currently offer and this was a big factor in deciding to move to a new site. (Respondent no.5)

Other comments include that made in response to a question on the impact of students generally on the service. Here the respondent was referring specifically to students from the local registered training organisations:

Often on weekends there are so many students in the libraries that there is insufficient seating available for library users. This has raised discussions about how to organise the spaces within the libraries. Wireless internet speeds have been affected by the number of students who come into the library to access the free WiFi. (Respondent no.1)

In response to the question relating to the implications for resourcing, staffing and service delivery for such large numbers of students, the same participant outlined possible actions:

We are considering changing the ratio of seating to collections to remove some of the collection from open access to allow more space to be given over to seating and workspaces. As a part of this move, we are implementing more ebooks to reduce the physical space required to house the collection without reducing the size of the collection. We are also looking at moving the reference collections over to online resources to free up space that could then be used for seating and workspaces. We are concerned about the impact on internet speeds due to high level of usage by students ... We are considering if there is a need to provide extra public computers to support users without their own devices. [The library's] opening hours are already quite extended, but there is a demand for longer hours particularly on Sundays. The other branches have reduced opening hours, but there is demand for longer hours and weekend opening. (Respondent no.1)



This theme was echoed by another participant, who stated:

The library is aware that our current space is too small and they are looking to possibly relocate in the next five years. We are aiming to have more study space, more chairs and possibly reducing book stock on the open shelves to allow more space to be devoted to seating and study space.

(Respondent no.3)

Another service had imposed a daily download limit for each user because:

The students were downloading excessive amounts of data ... and this was slowing down the internet connections to the library.

(Respondent no.5)

Another believed:

Students are using the spaces rather than the services. There is a high use of WiFi, but this is only determined by observation.

(Respondent no.4)

While these comments are associated with 'students' in general rather than specific types of students, the interviewees were conscious of the various groups utilising their service and distinguished between school students and others by the nature of their requests and the material they were accessing. Most participants seemed confident that particular resources were being used by particular identifiable groups and this generally enabled them to identify them.

It is worth reflecting on this issue of high demand for 'place' and the need for increasing access to technology in the public library context. The concept of the library as a 'third place' and perhaps as the only available 'study space' deserves highlighting at a time when there is increasing promotion of delivery of education remotely and online, pressures for ever-increasing student numbers and demands to recruit international students. This need for a 'third place' also appears to be occurring in an environment where it is often claimed that the need for library resources is declining, with the format for information believed to be shifting to the digital. While this shift has been occurring, the demand for a place to meet, study and access technology and resources would seem to be increasing and expanding.

Interestingly, such issues were not confined to the private registered training organisation sector, with one participant outlining approaches made by a large TAFE college with a request for their local library to store textbooks for them as the local campus did not have a library. This flagged a further issue which may have some impact on public library usage and this is the possible reduction of library branches or library opening hours. In addition, some universities have used the computer facilities of local public libraries for online examinations. The same service had also made a room available for distance education students from a number of universities to undertake exams, while in another library service the local TAFE ran a Certificate I in Information Technology at one of the local branches. The reason given for the use of the library space in this instance was said to be:

The RTOs like to use the library spaces because the library is seen as less threatening than a formal place of learning, so students are less likely to feel intimidated by their surroundings. They feel that holding the courses in the library allows them to attract some students that would otherwise choose not to study.

(Respondent no.1)

## Partnerships and benefits

A number of examples of positive synergies between the libraries and training organisations were listed and highlight how libraries and training organisations could mutually benefit from cooperation. The contribution of private training organisation students to the 'door count' is an example of mutual

benefit. The hire of space in one library service by a training organisation was also given as an example of a benefit of training organisation use of library facilities. The revenue received from this rental contributed to the resources of the library. Another example was the sub-contracting of the training organisation to deliver skills training in the library in areas where the library had identified a need for their patrons but which they did not have the expertise to deliver. This was:

Seen as valuable because they [the registered training organisation] fulfil a training need that the library identifies, but cannot meet due to funding constraints. The RTOs can access government money to provide the training in the library. (Respondent no.1)

One community training organisation had a long-term partnership with a branch library to deliver programs of community benefit such as language and literacy classes. All their programs were run from the library space and were seen as a positive initiative. The interviewee in this instance saw strong benefits to the library and the community from partnerships such as this.

An advantage is that the arrangement with ... brings disadvantaged people into the library for their training and they then get to see the library as a supportive and non-threatening place. This may attract them to come back and use the library for other purposes. (Respondent no.1)

Examples of collaboration and cooperation included the hosting of language programs funded by outside agencies on the library website and this was seen as a positive point of contact with the students and an opportunity for them to develop further contact with the library. This also allowed the community to access the resources without a large outlay by the library service. There were examples given of joint use libraries, involving collaboration between a TAFE college without a library and the local library service in providing user guides and databases to support their programs.

These examples however were tempered by concerns, outlined previously, about the demands such programs place on the facilities and services and the unofficial use of library space and facilities. Examples of the use of library rooms to deliver fee-for-service training unofficially was cited by a number of libraries as of being of concern. One participant described the following scenario:

At one stage there was a teacher from a private hospitality RTO using the library foyer as her classroom. At first she was using the magazine area of the library and the library PCs to run her classes. She needed lots of IT help from the library staff. Then the staff worked out what she was doing and she moved her class out into the foyer and used a library trestle table as her classroom. (Respondent no.7)

Staff also felt this was a problem, with one participant noting:

There has been some discontent amongst the library staff when people have been using their meeting rooms for commercial gain e.g. one individual was taking money for tutoring services that she was running out of the library meeting rooms. (Respondent no.4)

Another concern noted by two of the interviewees was of local registered training organisations advertising the library as part of their program. This participant stated:

We have had in the past one college that actually advertised us as their library. That had to change rather quickly! But I know a lot of them are under-resourced in terms of what they have got in their libraries, so they do send a lot of their students down to us as well. (Respondent no.3)

There are many tensions evident in these discussions and the balance between staffing, resources and the obligation of the training organisations is blurred. The student survey was conducted to gather further insight into the services and facilities offered by the training organisations and to establish what services were used by students in both the training organisations and the public libraries.

## Student survey

The aim of this phase of the research was:

- to examine public library usage by students attending private registered training organisations and the provision of library services by their home institutions
- provide insight into the reasons why such students use public libraries
- to determine the frequency of their usage
- to determine the resources and facilities used
- to gain any relevant details about the provision of such services by their training organisation.

The distribution of the survey was not limited to locations identified for the interviews as it was felt that this would limit the opportunity for responses. The survey was anonymous and used open-ended and closed questions and contained quantitative and qualitative questions. The survey was available both electronically via Survey Monkey and in hardcopy to allow participants a choice of response formats and flexibility in delivery. As it was anticipated that the desired research population for the survey could be difficult to locate or identify, a number of strategies were used and a number of agencies approached to recruit participants. The strategies employed included:

- approaches to identified registered training organisations for volunteer participants either via email or face to face
- self-identification through electronic recruitment at various library and student websites
- identification and/or recruitment by the library staff at libraries included in Stage 1 of the research
- approaches made by the researcher to those identified by staff in selected public libraries as fitting the research profile
- use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter to recruit participants
- flyers distributed at various locations.

Distribution of the survey was actively supported by a number of public libraries via their web pages and Twitter feeds. One large public library agreed to distribute the survey but by the submission of this report surveys had not been distributed or returned, despite numerous requests. This has had an impact on response rates and has been noted as a limitation of the study.

Requests to private providers to assist in distribution were largely unsuccessful. Sixty-four private providers were approached by email and telephone requesting assistance with distribution of the survey to their students. Each was sent an information sheet about the research project. Five providers responded, indicating an interest in distributing the survey. These providers were sent a copy of the survey to inform their decision to involve their students in the study. From this only one of the registered training organisations approached assisted with distribution. It should be noted that this provider offered library services for its students and this has some impact on the survey results.

There were 30 responses to the survey. Three of the respondents were male (10%) and their ages were scattered across the age ranges; however, the largest group were those aged between 25 and 30 years (23%). Geographically, most responses were from the states where the survey had been available on the library website and via Twitter. There were respondents from every state but Tasmania. Seventy per cent were studying at certificate level with health, employment services and business certificates making up the largest discipline groups and certificate III and IV the most common qualification level.

Given the small sample, the findings are not representative of all students studying with private registered training organisations but they can provide some insight into how these students use library services.

## Services and facilities

The survey focused most strongly on library services and information provision, but also investigated the provision of a number of other services or facilities such as information technology, accessibility to WiFi and counselling by the private educational organisation, as shown in table 3. The services provided appeared to be limited in range, with only 23% providing technology space, 47% wireless internet, 30% counselling and 11% a prayer room. A small number (n = 2) of respondents were however studying by distance and did not have access to some of these facilities, as noted in their comments. The results for IT services (technology space) given in Harris, Simons and McCarthy (2006) showed that fewer than 45% of commercial training providers provided these facilities and services (p.40). The figure for use of the services for study assistance in this study was 58.5%, a figure higher than those shown in Harris, Simons and McCarthy (2006). In terms of the provision of library facilities, this study and the Harris, Simons and McCarthy (2006) study reported 30%.

**Table 3 Facilities and services provided by private RTOs**

Facilities/services	% of RTOs providing service/facility
Technology space	23.5
WiFi	47.1
Laptop/mobile devices	17.6
Canteen or restaurant	35.3
Study assistance	58.8
Counseling	29.4
Access to textbooks/learning material	58.8
Prayer room	11.8

Source: Categories adapted from Harris, Simons and McCarthy (2006, pp.40–1).

## Libraries and resource centres

In response to a question about the existence of an area or space designated as ‘the library’ in their training organisation, respondents indicated that 70% did not have such a space. Of those who did have such a space, only 22% had a person designated as in charge of that area (that is, librarian). Of those with a library in their training institution, 50% used it for accessing resources for study and 38% for non-study materials. The majority used the library for help in finding information (88%) and to borrow items for study (75%) and as a study space (see table 4). The public library as a place for quiet study was also mentioned. For example, one respondent commented:

I go to local library to study during the exam period instead of going to my ‘school’ [RTO] library. This is because the ‘school’ [RTO] library is very busy when the exam is coming. It is quite hard to find a proper and quiet place in school since everyone [goes] there to study for their exam as well.

Another respondent commented on their desire to use other facilities, stating ‘I would like to be able to access a uni library however I’m not sure if I am able to’; another respondent used the public library to supplement the training institution’s material, stating that the ‘training content is wonderful. Sometimes I just need to locate extra information for my projects’. Another used the public library because the ‘local library provides quiet areas to study so it can help me to save time’.

Further insights into how various services were used could be gained by conducting further focus groups or one-on-one interviews.

Responses to the number, location and variety of libraries used by respondents indicated that some of the respondents used multiple libraries, including university libraries and their state library. Often their choice of library was influenced by the library's location and convenience, with some respondents indicating they used the library closest to their residential address rather than close to their place of study. Given the pattern of usage shown in table 4, it may also be that when both a training organisation library and a public library were available, the library which best met the immediate need of the student was chosen.

The small sample (with a large proportion from one registered training organisation with an on-site library) makes it difficult to draw too many conclusions about the usage of library services but there are some areas of difference in the survey worth noting (highlighted in italics in table 4) and the responses suggest that some useful insights can be gained. The use of the different library types to some extent reflects the focus of the various libraries' collections. Not surprisingly, more recreational materials were used, sourced and borrowed from the public library than their place of study. Some of the interviewees had flagged this as an issue with one stating:

There is a concern that students will need academic level databases that won't get much use by the general user community and will therefore not be supported during tight funding times. This is a concern if there is a section of their users whose needs are not being met because their required resources are only suitable for them, not the broader community. (Respondent no.1)

Another noted that policy prevented the purchase of textbooks

Collection management policies rule out the purchase of textbooks because the library doesn't see the provision of textbooks to be their role, but that of the training institution. (Respondent no.4)

As a matter of standard practice the collections of the public library and the VET provider library will be very different as they are constructed to meet the needs of their specific client base. Given the limitations placed on public libraries in collecting learning materials such as textbooks, it is unlikely that the specific needs of the students would be met by a public library collection.

## Student usage

As noted above, the results of the survey suggest that students with access to both public libraries and educational ones use the library most appropriate to meet their needs. This preference would to some extent be governed by the collections available in each library but also suggests that students employ discretion in their choice of library when possible. The public library is the main source of recreational material (87.5%), while the registered training organisation library meets the needs for course materials, textbooks (50%) and other learning materials such as databases (62.5%). The response in the survey on usage found that, for those with a library in their registered training organisation, their most used service was 'Help in finding information' (see table 4). This suggests that, in addition to resources, the staff of the library is a driver for student use. Staffing is a key element in the development of information literacy skills and perhaps accounts to some extent for the critical approach the students make when choosing a library to use. The use of IT equipment, internet and software in either the public or private library was not indicated as high usage. In contrast, more traditional uses such as the loan of books, a space for quiet study or requests for study items were

areas of high usage. The survey did not extend to examining why this may be the case, but access to resources not available elsewhere may provide one explanation for these findings.

**Table 4 Use made of library services and facilities in RTO and public libraries, %**

<b>Services or usage</b>	<b>RTO (n = 8)</b>	<b>Public (n = 15)</b>
<i>Books/ebooks for non-study-related purposes</i>	37.5	87.7
<i>Books/ebooks for study-related purposes</i>	50.0	26.4
CDs/DVDs/video for non-study-related purposes	12.5	33.3
CDs/DVDs/video for study-related purposes	0.0	13.3
Library website and resources such as online databases for non-study-related purposes	12.5	6.7
<i>Library website and resources such as online databases for study purposes</i>	62.5	13.3
Magazines and newspapers for non-study-related purposes	25.0	13.3
Internet access for non-study-related purposes	12.5	13.3
Internet access for study-related purposes	37.5	13.3
Use of a computer programs for non-study-related purposes	12.5	6.7
Use of a computer programs for study-related purposes	25.0	6.7
Loans/borrowing items for non-study purposes	12.5	33.3
<i>Loans/borrowing for study purposes</i>	75.0	13.3
Requests for items for non-study-related purposes	12.5	13.3
<i>Requests for items for study-related purposes</i>	75.0	13.3
<i>Help in finding information</i>	87.5	20.0
<i>Equipment i.e. photocopier, camera, e-reader</i>	37.5	40.0
<i>A place to read/study/work quietly</i>	50.0	33.3
Formal library or study classes	12.5	0.0

From the survey responses there emerges a picture of use related to resources, staff and ‘place’, suggesting that the relationship between these three areas in the educational setting is important to students in meeting their needs. The very different usage students make of public libraries and the libraries within their training institution poses the question of how and where such services are obtained if they are not provided within the private training organisation. Table 4 suggests that the requirements of students related to their study are not generally met by the public library, with the exception of providing ‘space’ for study. If this is the case, then there is a need to ask if students without the means to access adequate information infrastructure during their studies are at a disadvantage. The findings of the survey highlight the importance of the three key aspects of the library services – resources, staff and place – in meeting the needs of students. What the survey results also indicate is that, while resources and space are of great value, it may be staff who are the critical factor in determining value and in improving services and outcomes. If so, this reflects previous findings of the impact of professional library staff on educational outcomes in the school sector.

New research is required if we are to develop a more comprehensive view of the use of such services, student needs and the impact of such services on success. It is important to examine levels of unmet demand and any resulting disadvantage emerging from this lack of provision. One-to-one interviews and focus groups with representatives of the target student group would provide further insight into how these students use their library services and would also allow for a more in-depth examination of their usage and any unmet needs.

# Conclusion

This study provides preliminary insights into issues relating to the provision of information infrastructure in Australia. Some of the findings which emerged include:

- Partnerships between public libraries and training organisations can have positive outcomes if structured collaboratively and for mutual advantage.
- Public libraries can provide an opportunity for training providers to reach non-traditional audiences.
- Discrepancies exist between the expectations for the provision of information infrastructure in public TAFE institutes and those for private registered training organisations.
- The minimum standards of information infrastructure remain undefined.
- There is no national data on information infrastructure for VET providers or the impact of infrastructure on training outcomes. This is a gap in our understanding of the VET sector.
- The staff in libraries are important to the student experience.
- Public libraries are providing many beneficial support services for students but the provision of these may be placing pressure on staffing, services and facilities and have implications for overall service delivery.

What emerges from the literature review and the research is a picture of inconsistent and uneven provision of information infrastructure across the VET sector, with a public library sector providing services to students actively and largely in response to informal needs, rather than 'official' requests for assistance from their host organisations. That is to say, public libraries are informally identifying the needs of private VET students and are providing services and facilities to meet these needs. Based on research undertaken in other education sectors, this uneven provision of information infrastructure may have as yet unidentified implications for the quality of training delivery, long-term employability of those in training and the development of essential media and information literacy. Changes in delivery in all educational sectors and any decrease in adequate information infrastructure in educational and training organisations may place further pressure on public libraries to continue to cater adequately for these groups. Despite these pressures, examples and opportunities for collaboration between private VET providers and public libraries exist and could be used as templates for good practice by others.

The results of this study indicate that students use their libraries selectively – to fulfil different needs – when provided with options. Having adequate staffing appears to be essential to meeting the needs of students using libraries in the training organisations and was the most highly used element of service delivery for respondents. The library as a 'third place', where they can work, study and receive support and information, is also crucial to students: it provides them with opportunities for quiet study and reading.

From the responses to the survey and the interviews there also emerge important points for consideration that relate to a possible culture of disadvantage and the need for a greater understanding of the impact of information infrastructure provision on student outcomes. Such questions could include:

- What is the current state and availability of such infrastructure nationally?
- How do government providers compare with private providers in such provision?

- Does the provision of such infrastructure create an environment which encourages further use and contributes to success?
- Does the level of access to information infrastructure have an effect on study outcomes or the long-term ability to navigate the often complex contemporary social and employment environment?
- Is there a need to ensure that all those in training receive comparable and adequate levels of access to information infrastructure?

Access, support and resourcing are seen as essential in the school and higher education sectors; yet little is known about these issues in the VET environment. It is perhaps telling that in the Australian Government fact sheet: 'Choosing a training or education provider' (Australian Skills Quality Authority 2012) there is no mention of libraries, resource centres, non-study resource provision or professional support staff as a measure for the assessment of the suitability of a training organisation for international students. This same gap exists in similar checklists provided by state and territory governments.

The lack of national data on the provision of these services across the VET sector makes it difficult to assess the current state of information infrastructure in the sector or to compare this infrastructure provision with that provided to students in other sectors, including school and higher education. The research raises further questions about the continued provision and support for such infrastructure, questions such as the continuing need for information infrastructure in a digital age; the value placed pedagogically and economically on the provision of this infrastructure; and whether information services and facilities continue to play an important part in the construction and provision of sustainable and equitable opportunities for VET clients. If the provision of information infrastructure is no longer viewed as a key element in the lifelong learning agenda or considered necessary for the delivery of vocational education and training, how do we ensure that students have access to the resources and support they need? The current lack of any minimum standards for the provision of such services and the findings of this study suggest that it is unlikely that all VET participants are experiencing equitable levels of opportunity. The lack of such opportunity may have an impact on training outcomes and if so there may be a need to strengthen regulatory arrangements to ensure equitable access to information infrastructure for all those in the VET sector.

In the future provision of education and training, consideration needs to be given to the place of support services in providing high-quality, world-class education and training and the obligations (if any) of education and training providers in the delivery of these support services. There is also a need to examine the impact of such infrastructure – or more particularly, the absence of – on issues of inequality and disadvantage. Much more needs to be known about these issues and the net cast more broadly to include consideration of other elements of information infrastructure if we are to understand the degrees of advantage and disadvantage under which some VET students are operating and the associated long-term impact. The VET sector in some states and territories is already operating in vastly inequitable circumstances in relation to universities. While no national data are currently collected in this area, the Australian Library and Information Association (2011?, p.5) has calculated that:

In Victorian TAFE libraries, there was an average of one library staff member for every 793 students, compared with one per 352 students in Victorian universities. Budgeting for Victorian TAFE libraries worked out at \$26 per student, compared with the \$460 library expenditure for every university student.



As we move into an environment of increased online learning and evolving delivery methods, the role of public libraries and similar publicly funded organisations in the provision of high-quality training requires further examination. The findings from such an investigation will be critical if we are to understand the implication of such shifts, the impact on training delivery and the opportunities for collaboration and partnerships. Ultimately, a discussion of the place of efficient and well-resourced information infrastructure in Australia's VET system must occur.

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