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**Serving their communities: An analysis of Australian public library
mission statements**

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Serving their communities: An analysis of Australian public library mission statements

To understand the roles that Australian public libraries are aiming to play in their communities, mission statements from a sample of fifty public library networks were extracted from their corporate documents and subjected to both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The five broader roles most commonly articulated were to facilitate learning and discovery, to increase social connectedness, to provide spaces and places, to provide access to information and resources, and to facilitate inclusion and celebrate diversity. Overall, the mission of Australian public libraries focuses more on learning and community building than on their traditional function of information access provision.

Keywords: public libraries; mission statements; content analysis

Introduction

Public libraries have long been part of the social fabric of many communities, and, like other well-established societal institutions, a range of roles and purposes have been attributed to them through the years. In the Australian context, for example, Carroll and Reynolds (2014) list a number of roles that would be familiar to many: “a symbol of democracy and freedom; temple of learning and advocate of civilization and high culture; university of the common man; a place of collective memory; or as social and civic space” (p. 581). These roles, as Carroll and Reynolds (2014) point out, tend not to be the product of a single point in time, but instead have been embodied in different practices and services, and articulated in different languages, across multiple eras. Likewise, they are not mutually exclusive, and at any one time it is likely that public libraries, including those in Australia, mean multiple things to different people.

On the other hand, this does not imply that today’s public libraries are not viewed more in terms of certain roles than they are in terms of others, nor that certain roles do not come to prominence in the public and professional discourse of public libraries at a given

point in time. In these “COVID times”, there appears to be a particular emphasis on the role that public libraries play in keeping people and communities “connected”, despite the closure of many of their physical sites. In Australia, Wakeling et al. (in press) report how both librarians and users thought it important for public libraries to continue to provide as many of their usual services as they could, albeit often in modified form, not just because their communities still desired these services, but because for many clients their patronage was a significant component of their everyday lives and an important means of staying “in touch”: by continuing to use the library services, feelings of isolation brought about by social distancing rules could be alleviated.

The COVID pandemic has caused people to reflect on many things, including the roles played by a wide range of social institutions. Some that tend to be taken for granted, or to hide under the radar, have become perhaps a little more valued, and public libraries may fall into this category. Whether this deeper appreciation lasts any longer than the pandemic is another matter, however. The question remains, then, as to which public library functions are of particular importance to the community, notwithstanding COVID. Related to this is the question of which functions are of particular importance to those running the public libraries: what are public libraries *aiming* to do? What is their mission? It would be cause for further reflection, if this mission does not align with the principal roles the community as a whole assigns to public libraries, as indeed would a lack of correlation between what public libraries are aiming to do and their actual impact.

As a way of contributing to the discussion about the role of public libraries in a post-COVID world, this article reports on a content analysis of contemporary Australian public library mission statements. While the roles Australian public libraries should be performing has been discussed from time to time, there has been very little coverage of what they are *trying* to do, in the broader terms of their overall mission. The corporate mission statements

of the public libraries themselves are an excellent source for research on this topic, and nowadays can often be found online. In the study reported here, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were applied to the content of a wide sample of statements in order to paint a high-level picture of how public libraries across Australia are aiming to serve their communities. As the vast majority of the statements predated the COVID pandemic, it is a picture not complicated by more immediate considerations, and, although this picture may need to be adjusted in a post-COVID world, as libraries review their own priorities, it serves as a starting point for this review.

The research question this study aimed to answer was thus: *What are the roles of Australian public libraries as articulated in their formal mission statements?* It was expected that various aspects of the mission statements could be explored through the analysis, including their degree of homogeneity, possible geographical differences, and the extent to which they matched public library roles expounded in the literature.

Literature review

While the mission of public libraries has not been a very common topic of research, the role that they should and do play (as opposed to aim to play) has been discussed widely in the LIS literature. Perceptions of what public libraries do have likewise been investigated in a number of ways, as have views on what they should do. These two perspectives, representing library outcomes as well as worldviews, are interrelated, of course, and have been placed under the umbrella of “values” by Sørensen (2020), that is, the values represented by public libraries for various people, based on their experiences and/or outlooks. The author selected 19 empirical studies of public library values in a systematic review of the literature’s coverage of the topic.

As well as identifying various kinds and degrees of bias in the studies' methodologies, Sørensen's review (2020) indicates that interest in public library "values" has been strong across the past two decades, a period in which many public libraries have increasingly turned their attention to roles that transcend their traditional function of information provision, including that of "community hubs". However, none of the studies analysed covered Australian perceptions, and only one examined mission statements (discussed below). Most commonly, users were interviewed or surveyed, though other participants included non-users, librarians, and councillors. The general aims, or mission, of public libraries themselves would have been the focus perhaps only of the mission statement study, though those that involved librarians and councillors as participants may well have also touched on what public libraries were aiming to do.

The mission statement study included by Sørensen (2020) was conducted by Barniskis (2016), who examined mission statements from 32 public libraries in the state of Wisconsin, employing a critical, constructivist grounded theory approach. Roles identified in the statements included those of facilitating "lifelong learning", and information/knowledge provision more generally, as well as offering opportunities for recreation, culture and civic engagement. Particular "values" associated with the libraries' missions included access, quality (e.g., of materials), inclusion/diversity and equity. Barniskis (2016) noted the "cut and paste" and "formulaic" nature of some of the statements, and the ways in which the statements implied a standpoint in which the libraries were in control, offering various services to their communities, rather than in genuine partnership with them: despite lip service paid to a focus on users, the libraries determined what it was that they were using.

One other recent analysis of public library mission statements has been reported by Fraser-Arnott (2021). A cross-section of statements from 80 libraries across the United States and Canada was examined through a qualitative content analysis, first deductively and then

inductively. The components that the author identified were community building, culture and recreation, education and learning, equitable access, information, positive impact, and stewardship. This provided a very high-level picture of the present-day mission of public libraries in North America, though no indication of any particular emphases amongst the categories was given.

Related to mission, there have also been studies of public library policy, that is, the aims and plans that governments have for their public libraries more generally. Widdersheim et al. (2021) report that different governments across the world view the role of public libraries somewhat differently: in Norway, there is an emphasis on libraries as public meeting spaces; in Japan, there is greater emphasis on their development of the “literary public sphere”; while in the United States, public libraries are governed more locally, with an emphasis on their role in the public sphere too, but more for educational and recreational purposes, than in relation to infrastructure.

Studies of the role of public libraries, as embodied in policy or as perceived by librarians or the population at large, or as it plays out in actual use, have resulted, either directly or indirectly, in a number of models. A more well-known model is that of the “four spaces”, developed and used in Scandinavia: Jochumsen, Rasmussen and Skot-Hansen (2012) discuss the model’s potential applications following its introduction in Denmark. It incorporates the four goals of offering patrons experience, involvement, empowerment and innovation, which are met through the provision of four spaces, namely inspiration space, learning space, meeting space, and performative space, which are used to excite, explore, participate and create, respectively. These spaces and activities overlap, as per Figure 1 below.

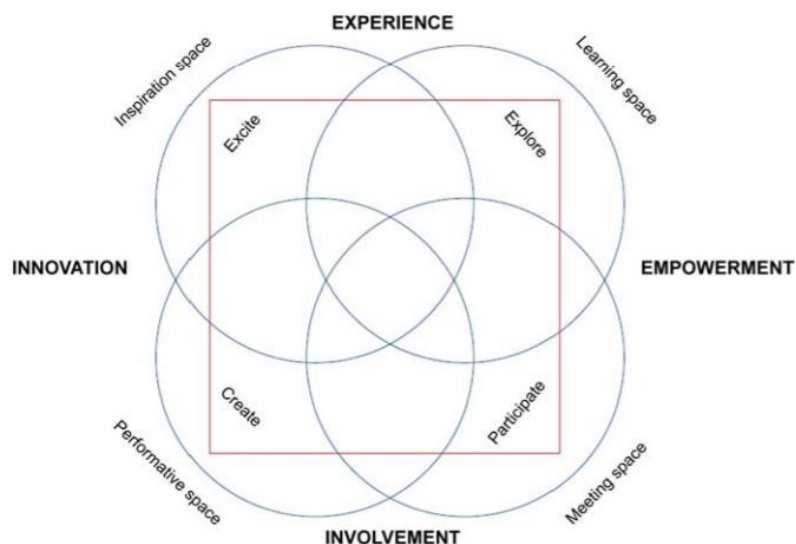


Figure 1. The four spaces of the public library, from Jochumsen, Rasmussen and Skot-Hansen (2012)

Another, more recent study (Seismonaut & Roskilde Central Library, 2021) hailing from Denmark utilised the framework developed in the Cultural Value Project for the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016), and demonstrated that Danish public libraries impacted across four dimensions: they are “a haven in which users experience well-being and immerse themselves”; they “give users perspective on life”; they “allow people to develop creatively”; and they “help form and maintain communities”.

The “meeting space” component of the Jochumsen, Rasmussen and Skot-Hansen (2012) model relates to the notion of libraries as a “third place”, which derives from the work of Oldenburg (1999), who contrasts this place with the places of home and work, and argues for its importance in maintaining a democratic society by providing an arena for people to share and discuss different views and values in a safe and constructive way. The extent that this is possible in today’s environment has been called into question, however. Rooney-Browne and McMenemy (2010), for example, ask whether the “impartial spaces” that public libraries might aim to offer can be truly independent of the ever more encroaching

commercial world. While commentators such as Buschman (2005) advocate for libraries as “a place where the ideal of unfettered communication and investigation exists in rudimentary form, hosting the turbulent discourse of a democracy and its culture” (p. 9-10), Williamson (2000) cautions against the development of a “fake version” of the public sphere, which excludes important elements of it, including its cultural and recreational roles.

A related concept that other writers have focused on as an important function of public libraries is that of civic engagement, realised not only through their provision of free and fair access to information, but also through their facilitation of patrons’ engagement with particular civic issues (Kranich, 2005). The increased participation in civic and community affairs by all sections of society, especially vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, increases social inclusion, another oft-cited goal of public libraries, and their ultimate aim according to the “quadruple helix” adopted by Newcastle upon Tyne Libraries in the UK. In this model, the library service provides infrastructures, skills, and the ability to achieve goals, as well as social inclusion (Ruiu & Regnedda, 2017).

An even broader goal for public libraries, however, has also been proposed, namely that of community building (Scott, 2011). This aim has been contextualised by Skot-Hansen, Rasmussen and Jochumsen (2013) in a study of how public libraries can contribute to “culture-led urban regeneration” as “an icon, a placemaker and as community visualization”. In this vein, there has been much talk over the past two decades of libraries switching their focus from “collections to connections”, with greater emphasis placed on their social and relational nature, as community hubs and as the inclusive meeting places discussed above (Mathiasson & Jochumsen, 2020).

Related to the concept of community building is that of “social capital”, which is defined by Putnam (1993) both as a collective and individual resource, and as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks can that improve the efficiency of

society by facilitating coordinated action” (p. 167). Varheim (2017) argues that “linking” social capital is something that public libraries are especially adept at creating by building trust between patron and librarian, and that by doing so they contribute to the development of community resilience. This resilience can be used to respond effectively to specific disasters, or to respond to threats at a more generalised level. The idea of public libraries contributing to social capital in the Australian context has been explored by Hillenbrand (2005).

In summary, many of the roles and functions of public libraries that have been discussed by writers in recent decades are represented in the findings of those empirical studies that have investigated the roles that their communities see public libraries fulfilling. Few studies have examined the missions articulated by the libraries themselves, however, and it remains an open question as to where the emphasis might lie in particular times and places.

Materials and methods

The content analysed in this study was extracted from corporate documents retrieved from publicly accessible parts of local government websites. Mission statements that are titled as such would appear to be less common in Australia than in North America, at least amongst public libraries. Instead, the authors found, from a preliminary environmental scan, that many Australia public library networks publish strategic plans, annual reports and the like which include formal articulations of their overall mission, but that these are sometimes headed “vision”, “purpose” or another term, other than “mission”. Thus it was decided to search for all statements with headings that included one of the three terms, “mission”, “vision” and “purpose”, and include for analysis those that were about a public library network’s overall mission. (It should be noted here that Australian public libraries are generally run by local government authorities, and that formal mission statements are usually published at this level,

which typically comprises several branch libraries and is referred to in this article as a “network”.)

As the corporate documents containing the statements were either absent or not easy to find on many of the networks’ websites, they were collected through searches using a web search engine (Google) and the terms “public library”, “public libraries”, “city library”, “city libraries”, “regional library”, “regional libraries”, “mission(s)”, “vision(s)”, “purpose(s)”, “role(s)”, “aim(s)”, “goal(s)”, “strategic plan” and “annual report”.

Although this purposive form of sampling circumscribes the conclusions that can be reached through statistical analysis, the searches would likely have retrieved most documents containing the statements sought, and the result sets were examined exhaustively. Thus the statements included for analysis would have represented most of the population of statements that were freely accessible on the Web. Of course, the sample is biased towards those published on the Web, and the results need to be interpreted with this in mind.

In some cases, where multiple documents containing relevant statements were retrieved for the same library network, the latest one was used. In some of the documents, there were different statements headed by two of the three terms (mission, vision, purpose), though never all three. As aspects of mission were usually articulated in both statements, when this occurred, it was decided to include both statements for analysis, as long as they covered the overall mission of their library network. Statements that covered the mission of the local government authority more generally, or that covered a period starting earlier than 2016, were not included.

Statements from exactly 50 public library networks were identified within scope and were copied and entered into an Excel spreadsheet, together with the following details: the name of the network; the title of the document; year the document was created, or its copyright or publication year, where available; the document’s URL; the state in which the

network is located; and its area's remoteness, classified using the scheme, *ASGS Remoteness Areas 2016* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The statements collected ranged from a few words to one or two paragraphs (in a few cases a diagram was incorporated). Altogether, 23 "mission" statements, 44 "vision" statements and 10 "purpose" statements were obtained, for the 50 networks. The distribution of states and remoteness across the networks is shown in Tables 1 and 2, indicating a sample reasonably representative of Australian geography, though there is a deficiency of Western Australian networks relative to number and human population. In Table 2, the networks classified as "Inner regional plus" cover an area with both inner regional and more remote components.

Table 1. Distribution of states

State	ACT	NSW	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	<i>Total</i>
Number	1	16	8	3	1	20	1	50

Table 2. Distribution of remoteness

Class	Major cities	Inner regional	Inner regional plus	Not given	<i>Total</i>
Number	25	22	2	1	50

A mixed methods content analysis was undertaken using the statements collected, described as follows, with qualitative and quantitative approaches employed consecutively.

Qualitative method

A qualitative content analysis was conducted along the lines set out by Mayring (2014), with the content coded inductively according to the various types of role mentioned. Three of the authors coded an initial sample (20%) in order to construct a preliminary codebook, with one to three levels of codes. This codebook was then tested on a further 20% of the content, with two of the authors coding in parallel. The codebook was adjusted in a few minor ways half-

way through this coding, with some definitional discussion also occurring between the two coders at that point. Across the second half of the parallel coding, a sufficiently high level of inter-coder agreement was considered to have been achieved for the purposes of a qualitative analysis (Cohen's kappa coefficient = 0.793). The remaining content was coded by one of the authors; previous codes were also reviewed and, in a few cases, adjusted in light of the adjustments made to the codebook.

To gauge the extent to which each type of role featured in statements from across the networks, the codes were counted, with each code only assigned once within a given network's (combined) text, as shown in Table 4. As multiple codes at different levels within the same hierarchy could be assigned within the same text, another set of frequencies was calculated for each hierarchy as a whole by treating these multiples as a single count, resulting in Table 5. Associations between the state or remoteness of the library network and its codes were also tested for statistical significance (although the sample was not strictly random). However, perhaps partly due to the low numbers, no significant associations were found.

Quantitative method

The content was analysed quantitatively in a number of ways. Preliminary analysis indicated that not only did the statements collected from the different library networks vary in length (number of words), but so did the types of statements, under the three headings, with purpose statements being considerably longer than vision and mission statements (see Table 3). Seventeen networks only had vision statements and three networks had each only mission or purpose. Seven networks had both vision and purpose, and 20 networks had both vision and mission. However, comparison of the three statement types pointed to a high degree of content similarity, with large amounts of overlap between their lists of most frequent terms,

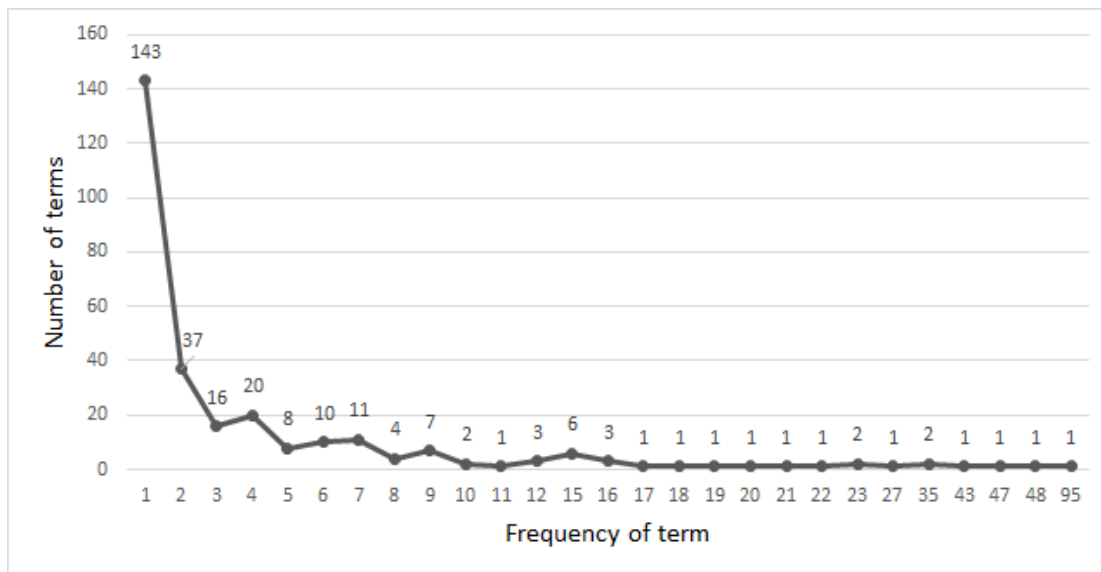
when generated in the way described below. For instance, for the top seven terms (after which ties complicate the measure), the Jaccard index for the three combinations is 0.75 (vision and mission), 0.75 (vision and purpose) and 0.56 (mission and purpose); in other words, more than half of the terms were shared. Given these results, the authors were confident about treating the statement types as a single source of content, for the purposes of both qualitative analysis and the remainder of the quantitative analysis.

For each public library network, therefore, all the text available as part of mission, vision or purpose statements was combined into a single text that was deemed to represent the complete, stated mission for that network. As such, this text was considered the unit of analysis. These texts underwent some cleaning, including the removal of generic terms such as vision, mission, purpose and library, along with the usual stop words (e.g., is, am, will, on). Lemmatisation was then performed in order to group related terms (e.g., connecting, connected and connectedness under “connect”). This process left 286 unique terms with a total frequency of 1,315. The frequency distribution in Figure 2 shows a long-tail distribution, with 143 terms occurring only once in the entire corpus and 30 terms with a frequency of 10 or more.

Table 3. Preponderance and length of vision, mission and purpose statements

	Vision	Mission	Purpose	Combined
Number	44	23	10	50
Average length (words)	36	26	70	58

Figure 2. Frequency distribution of terms



T-Lab, a text analysis software package, was used to perform co-word analysis, which looks for patterns of co-occurrence of pairs of terms in phrases of three terms (trigrams) in order to identify relationships between concepts. Co-word analysis was performed only for terms with the frequency of four or more (90 terms). This was done so as to only include terms with some significance in the corpus, and also to ensure the output of the analysis was not too crowded to read and understand.

Results

Qualitative

Table 4 shows the codes that were established for the various roles described in the statements, together with the number of networks with texts that were assigned them. A wide range of roles were identified. Two roles—to facilitate learning and discovery, and to increase social connectedness—were mentioned by most networks, several were mentioned by large minorities, while a number of others in just a few statements. Sometimes, statements highlighted one or more components of a broad role. So, for example, libraries support

various kinds of learning, including various kinds of literacies. “Literacy and learning for life” (ACT Libraries) were often linked, while a less instrumentalist emphasis tended to link to collections for “discovery” and “exploration”, as in “We help people... Learn: Our free resources allow minds to explore and create” (West Gippsland Libraries, VIC).

The concept of connection was used in various ways, but commonly in terms of social connection, with libraries facilitating social interaction. This was often expressed as a means to an end, as part of a larger enterprise, for both community and individuals. Thus libraries are there “To provide opportunities to empower our community to be connected, inclusive and informed” (Cairns Libraries, QLD), and “By engaging with Darebin Libraries, our community will: Connect. Discover. Learn” (Darebin Libraries, VIC).

Very often, the goal is also for community members to be “informed”, but very often this is only part of a broader mission: public libraries appear keen to confirm that they are no longer only reservoirs of information. Thus they offer a whole gamut of important benefits: “The library service provides access to information, resources, programs and spaces for all ages to learn, imagine, create and connect; contributing to a sense of belonging, enriched social life, wellbeing and liveability in Bayside” (Bayside Library Services, VIC); similarly, “Our public library purpose is to provide professional and open access to information as well as to provide a place for the whole community to come together to share ideas, knowledge and experiences” (Georges River Libraries, NSW).

A more abbreviated notion of role was quite often headlined in the statements, sometimes in more general, and somewhat emotive, terms, such as “Inspiring people, engaging communities, enriching lives” (Riverina Regional Library, NSW). This may well reflect not only how managers would like their communities to view their libraries, but perhaps also how some of their clients actually value them.

Table 4. Roles with frequencies

Role	<i>f</i>
Facilitate (life-long) learning and discovery	37
Support literacy	7
Digital literacy	2
Technological literacy	7
Increase social connectedness	34
Help connect people to services	4
Help foster/incubate partnerships and collaboration	4
Provide access to information and resources	23
Provide resources for enjoyment/recreation/relaxation	12
Provide quality/reliable resources	3
Increase wellbeing / Enrich lives	20
Facilitate inclusion/celebrate diversity	15
Provide equitable access	12
Provide spaces and places	13
Provide welcoming, safe, neutral and comfortable spaces and places	16
Provide a community living room/third place / Serve as community hubs	13
Provide a place to create	10
Provide engaging/inspiring spaces	8
Provide a place to discover	8
Provide a place to exchange ideas / debate	7
Provide meeting places	3
Provide purposeful spaces	1
Facilitate and promote creativity/innovation	15
Support entrepreneurship	2
Build resilience	11
Build culture	6
Promote reading culture	6
Share and collect cultural and local histories	3
Provide experiences	3
Develop workforces	2
Showcase community	2
Showcase council	1
Advance libraries (in general)	1

Table 5 gives the hierarchies in the codebook with frequencies above 10 (out of 50), indicating, again, that most networks highlighted their role of facilitating learning and social connectedness. However, in addition, about half mentioned their provision of public spaces

for various activities, as well as their role in providing access to information and resources. Sometimes these spaces were promoted in a more general way, such as “Inspiring spaces where everyone is free to discover possibilities” (Casey Cardinia Libraries, VIC); other times, particular functions of these spaces were articulated, as in “A space to read, learn, create and discover” (Cairns Libraries, QLD). Public libraries’ role in promoting social inclusion is also frequently mentioned, both more generally and also specifically through their “welcoming” spaces. The broad function of increasing wellbeing and life enrichment figured in 40% of the networks’ texts, while creativity or innovation was mentioned in general terms, by 30% of networks, and by 20% in relation specifically to the libraries’ spaces. A relatively small number of networks (26%) highlighted the role of building culture.

Table 5. Collapsed roles with frequencies

Role	<i>f</i>
Facilitate (life-long) learning and discovery	39
Increase social connectedness	35
Provide spaces and places	26
Provide access to information and resources	25
Facilitate inclusion/celebrate diversity	21
Increase wellbeing / Enrich lives	20
Facilitate and promote creativity/innovation	15
Build culture	13
Build resilience	11

It is notable that the mission of public libraries, as articulated by these networks, focuses more on learning and “social capital” than on their traditional function of information access provision. Prominent ways in which they aim to increase social connectedness are by creating inclusive spaces and services, and by promoting cultural diversity, concepts that have also become increasingly prominent in Australian public policy discourse more generally. Mentioned by almost as many networks was the concept of the community hub,

whereby library spaces can be used as meeting places for individuals in the community to socialise and network, resulting, again, in an increase in the community’s social capital.

It is also worth noting that there were a number of phrasings in the statements that were challenging to code because of their vagueness, such as “A library open for all to discover a world of possibilities”.

Quantitative

Table 6 shows the top 20 terms based on the number of networks that included the term (or a variant of it) in their texts. Total frequency here is the number of occurrences of the term throughout the entire corpus. Community was the most frequently used term appearing 95 times, and in the texts of 41 of the 50 networks, confirming the centrality of the concept of community in their mission statements.

Overall, the top terms aligned closely with the top codes from the qualitative analysis, with the top two codes associated with the top three terms (community, learn and connect). Other frequently occurring terms that could be associated with frequently assigned codes include “inclusion” and “space”, “information”, “welcoming” and “place”. One quite common code that is not clearly linked to any of the top terms is that of providing resources for enjoyment/recreation/relaxation. To provide a fuller picture of the top terms, Figure 3 consists of a word cloud created from all of the 90 terms with a total frequency of four or more.

Table 6. Frequency of top 20 terms

Term	Total frequency	Number of networks using the term	Percentage of networks using the term
community	95	41	82
learn	47	32	64
connect	48	31	62
service	43	31	62

provide	35	23	46
inspire	19	19	38
create	27	18	36
support	22	18	36
inclusion	21	18	36
space	23	17	34
information	23	17	34
access	20	17	34
enrich	18	16	32
lifelong	17	15	30
welcoming	16	15	30
place	35	14	28
discover	15	14	28
people	16	13	26
resource	15	13	26
opportunity	15	13	26

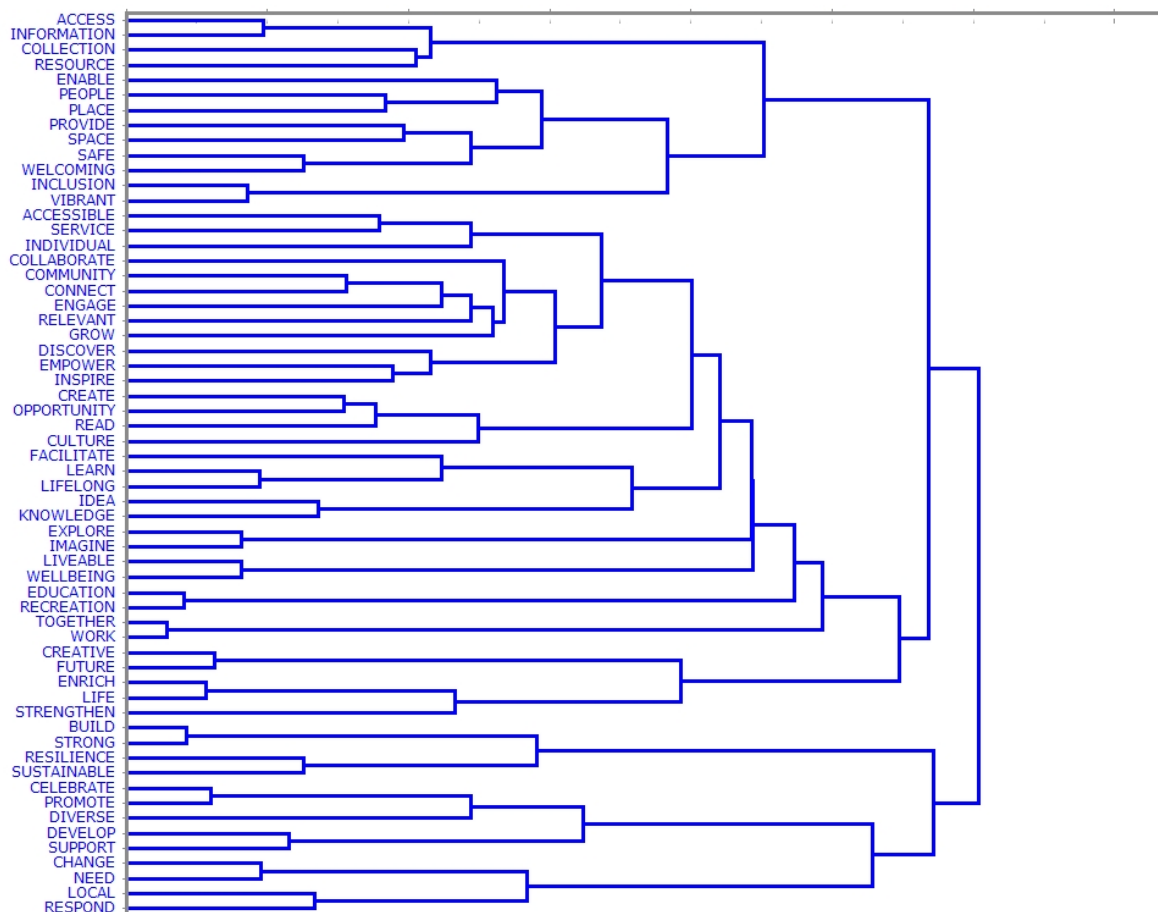
Figure 3. Word cloud of terms with frequency of 4 or more



To understand how different concepts are related to one another, a word association was conducted to identify terms that appeared within two words from each other (trigrams), resulting in the dendrogram in Figure 4. The dendrogram was created through a hierarchical clustering with branches showing how strongly connected terms are. For instance, “information” and “access” were often used next to one another in the texts, and so the pair

are located close together (adjacent in fact) in the dendrogram. They are then, in turn, linked to the closely associated pair of terms, “collection” and “resource”, higher in the tree. There are many term pairs that the dendrogram indicates have been often used together in mission statements, including learn and lifelong, community and connect, knowledge and idea, resilience and sustainable, work and together, people and place. Some of these triangulate with some of the concept clustering to be found in the code hierarchies of the qualitative analysis.

Figure 4. Dendrogram of word associations within trigrams with co-occurrence of 2 or more



Besides the key concepts that appeared prominently in these results, there were many terms that appeared only in one or two networks’ texts. For instance, “children”, “young”, and “adult” each occurred only in one text and only two had the phrase “for all ages”, while terms such as “elderly” were not used at all, indicating that the texts tended not to highlight

services or activities related to specific age groups. Similarly, only one network included the word “record” and only two included “history”, while only one made mention of “music” and “art”, omissions aligned with a relative lack of coding for “building culture” in the qualitative analysis.

Discussion

With no role category covered by 80% of the library networks, it is clear that Australian public libraries do not have a cookie-cutter approach to their mission. On the other hand, most networks include at least some of the roles with which they are commonly associated. Collectively, public libraries see themselves as supporting learning and discovery, and access to information and related resources, and providing spaces for community members that are welcoming irrespective of their background, for them to enjoy in a range of ways, including to connect with the rest of their community.

Not all of the activities that might be common ways in which public libraries are used featured prominently in the mission statements, however. For example, though the promotion of reading (beyond functional literacy) was mentioned by six networks, this means that it was not a feature in the vast majority of missions. The increasing push to service public library users online (even before COVID times) was likewise little reflected explicitly in the texts. Public mission statements may serve a political as well as managerial purpose; physical spaces and services may still carry more weight in this respect, and the “cultural” perhaps less so.

On the other hand, mission statements would have been crafted not only with some knowledge of community expectations, but also with an eye on the capacity to meet those expectations. This capacity would in turn be based at least partly on existing services, which in turn would relate, to an extent, to existing use. It would be interesting to investigate to

what extent this is the case, that is, to what extent this picture of what Australian public libraries are trying to achieve is reflected by the reality of how they are, in fact, being used.

The Australian mission statements align quite strongly with those studied by Barniskis (2016). However, there appears to be more emphasis on social connection in Australia and more emphasis on recreation, culture and civic engagement in the United States (or at least Wisconsin). One might speculate that this reflects a relative lack of alternative institutions, including religious institutions, for community building in Australia, as well as a stronger relationship between information and democracy in American political philosophy, leading to a closer connection between libraries and civic engagement. As mentioned above, it is possible that the “cultural” functions of public libraries in Australia are being underplayed in the mission statements due to these functions’ lack of political weight; the recreational might also be underplayed in comparison with the more “essential” services local governments provide, despite its possible popularity.

While the “cut and paste” criticism of Barniskis (2016) cannot be levelled at the Australian mission statements, they shared with the Wisconsin statements a top-down approach that put control in the hands of the libraries’ councils and management rather than of their communities at large. The language in the statements similarly conveyed their services and spaces as being *for* their communities rather than as being *part* of their communities.

The conceptual components of the North American mission statements analysed by Fraser-Arnott (2021) also aligned quite closely with those prominent amongst the Australian ones. The one exception is the North American statements’ concept of “stewardship”: there was less mention of collections in general in the Australian statements, which might relate to their de-emphasising, potentially, of culture and recreation.

The Australian mission statements also touch on many of the elements in the models expounding on the role of public libraries outlined in the literature review, though some elements more than others. The four spaces in the model of Jochumsen, Rasmussen and Skot-Hansen (2012) are reflected in some of the codes under the “provide spaces and places” role, while its learning and performative spaces are also partly represented by other codes elsewhere in the codebook. The more specific concept of “third place” also featured in the Australian texts, though it was only explicitly articulated in a few cases. Rather, public libraries were more frequently positioned as community builders more broadly, in the way that Scott (2011) proposes.

This community building role maps directly to the community dimension identified in the recent Danish study by Seismonaut and Roskilde Central Library (2021), with social connection, inclusion and interaction prominent concepts across the Australian missions. The study’s other three dimensions are also quite well represented: the library spaces portrayed in the mission statements quite often had the connotation of a “haven”, and the outcome of increased wellbeing was mentioned by a large number of networks; the leading role of facilitating learning and discovery directly correlates with the perspective dimension; and, although less pronounced, the facilitation of creation and innovation featured in a significant number of the texts.

While the Australian mission statements might not exactly reflect governmental policy on public libraries, particularly at the higher levels, it is worth comparing their content with the commentary provided by Widdersheim et al. (2021). Perhaps the Australian stance is somewhere in between the Norwegian emphasis on libraries as public meeting spaces and the American emphasis on their educational and recreational purpose. Australian public libraries provide important informal learning opportunities, but also spaces that foster, and embody, social connection and interaction.

Over the past two decades both the professional and scholarly literature has increasingly emphasised the connecting role which public libraries can, and do, play. The mission statements published by Australian public library networks are very much aligned with this development. Public libraries in Australia are keen to play their part in connecting people with each other and with community services and activities, as well as with information and traditional library materials.

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