

**Paper published in the Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association (2017)**

## **Universities and public libraries supporting student success: an exploratory study**

Alisa Howlett

Scholarly Information and Learning Services, University of Southern Queensland

West Street, Toowoomba, QLD, Australia, 4350

61 402 496 996

[alisa.howlett@usq.edu.au](mailto:alisa.howlett@usq.edu.au)

Alisa Howlett is an information professional in higher education, currently coordinating projects related to improving library services and student learning experiences. Alisa is an active member of the library and information professional community through her writing and speaking, and position of chairperson for Australian Library and Information Association's (ALIA) New Generation Advisory Committee. Alisa has a Bachelor of Business from Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and received her Master of Information Technology (Library and Information Science) in 2013.

Professor Helen Partridge

Scholarly Information and Learning Services, University of Southern Queensland

West Street, Toowoomba, QLD, Australia, 4350

61 7 4631 2795

[helen.partridge@usq.edu.au](mailto:helen.partridge@usq.edu.au)

Professor Helen Partridge is Pro Vice-Chancellor (Scholarly Information and Learning Services) at the University of Southern Queensland. She has oversight for USQ's Library Services, Office for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching and the Digital Life Lab. She has twice been elected to the Board of Directors of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), and was appointed a Fellow of the Association in 2012. Helen has been a visiting Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, and the Berkman Center for Internet and Society and Society, Harvard University.

Rebecca Belov

Scholarly Information and Learning Services, University of Southern Queensland

West Street, Toowoomba, QLD, Australia, 4350

Rebecca Belov gained undergraduate qualifications in information technology, arts and science and has previously worked in the tertiary education sector providing information technology support for staff and students studying via distance education. After completing a Master of Physiotherapy Studies, Rebecca now works in a musculoskeletal clinic in Brisbane.

## **Abstract**

As universities seek new ways to engage and support students in their learning, in Australia, students from regional and remote areas pose a challenge for universities given their geographical, social and technological isolation compared with their metropolitan counterparts. Much of the literature that address challenges associated with distance learning focus on teaching, course design and ways of accessing learning materials. Little is known about the provision of learning support services.

Public libraries are well placed within their communities to assist university students with their learning needs. The aim of this research was to explore the idea of universities and public library services working together to support regional student success. The University of Southern Queensland, provided the context for this study. Semi-structured interviews with representatives from public library services in regional areas of Queensland were conducted to find out what service is currently being provided to students; challenges, opportunities and related issues.

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes that told the ‘story’ within the data. Findings suggest there is an opportunity for universities and public libraries to work together to support regional student success, and that this opportunity is worthy of further discussion and exploration.

**Keywords:** learning support; universities; public libraries; student success; regional areas; qualitative research

## **Implications for best practice:**

- Increased participation in university study ‘by distance’ and in regional areas requires reflection on how learning support services are meeting the needs of this student cohort.
- Due to their place within local communities, being welcoming and inclusive and for ‘all learning’, public libraries may be where students turn for learning and research support.
- Universities and public libraries seeking to work together need to understand each other’s different roles and responsibilities to their user communities.

## **Introduction**

In Australia, students from regional and remote areas pose a challenge for universities given their geographical, social and technological isolation compared with their metropolitan counterparts. Face-to-face connection, peer networks and adequate support from the education provider are potentially missing elements of a learning experience that is better provided to on-campus university students (Ifenthaler et al., 2014; Lowrie, 2012; MacIntyre & MacDonald, 2011; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Waha & Davis, 2014; Žuvic-Butorac et al., 2011). In light of the Australian Government’s targets to increase university participation for young people, universities are now tasked with developing innovative ways to engage with communities and maximise student retention.

Much of the literature that addresses challenges associated with distance learning focuses on teaching, course design and ways of accessing learning materials. Little is known about the

provision of learning support services - the service models, frameworks and scaffolding around a student's learning experience. Also, the existing literature presents a limited understanding of how collaboration and partnerships can work between universities and local organisations, such as councils and public libraries. However, it has been found that a university presence in rural areas is perceived to be important by these communities (Drummond, Halsey and van Breda, 2011).

The idea of universities and public library services working together to support regional student success is explored with this qualitative study. The University of Southern Queensland is one of Australia's leading regional universities that specialises in supporting regional and remote students. Within this context, semi-structured interviews with representatives from public library services in regional areas of Queensland were conducted to find out what service is currently being provided to students; challenges, opportunities and related issues. Findings are discussed with related literature, providing a starting point for further exploration and discourse about how universities can provide better learning support to students in regional areas across Australia.

## **Background research context**

### *Student success in regional areas*

According to the Department of Education and Training (DET) (2015), the number of commencing students at tertiary level is increasing. Since 2005, this number has increased five per cent per year on average. Students located in regional and remote areas are also increasing, though at a slower rate than the general increase (DET, 2015). The general premise of what is 'regional', 'rural' and 'remote' is the geographical distance from urban centres, and the facilities, services and social connections that these centres offer. However, other factors can influence a region's 'remoteness', such as socio-economic status, cultural identity and population size (AIHW, 2004, p. 1 and APMRC, 2015). Access to technology and quality Internet, as well as peer and institutional support are factors found to potentially contribute to attrition rates when compared with on-campus students (CSU, 2009; Parkes et al., 2015; Whannell & Whannell, 2013; Ifenthaler et al., 2014; Lowrie, 2012; MacIntyre & MacDonald, 2011; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Waha & Davis, 2014; Žuvic-Butorac et al., 2011). University students undertaking programs while located in regional and remote areas therefore, face a range of challenges that influence their study success.

In the 2008 Bradley report of higher education, it was recommended that Australia increase the proportion of people aged 25-34 completed a first degree to 40% by 2020 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008). Given this target is already being met in many urban areas, Drummond, Halsey and van Breda (2011, p. 2) suggest that any increase in participation and success must then come from "low socio-economic status and rural, regional and remote communities and schools". Drummond et al (2011, p. 6-7) investigated the perceived importance of university presence in rural, regional and remote Australia and found that access to affordable internet services, collaboration between local government, businesses and universities, and young people wanting to be a part of the future of rural communities were among the most important aspects of a university presence in these areas. Also, 'distance education' was identified as one of the four themes found in qualitative data about desired improvements to university education in rural Australia (Drummond et al, 2011, p. 9). In order for participation and success in university study to increase in regional and remote area populations, literature indicates a need for a university presence of some degree to bring economic and social benefits to these communities.

## *Universities and public libraries working together*

Public libraries foster literacy and learning formally and informally, and support communities through the development of cultural identity, information provision and the presence of a physical space that can be adapted to meet a range of needs (Gill, 1994; Koontz & Gubbin, 2010). According to the literature, public libraries can help facilitate information and digital literacy and foster life-long learning skills (Becker, 2006; Johnson, Adams, Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2015), which in turn can increase retention (Haddow & Joseph, 2010; Hagel et al., 2012). Public libraries can also support students by providing the face-to-face human interaction that they might otherwise miss out on (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014). However, there have been only a handful of examples reported on how universities and public libraries can work together.

In Australia, the “Community Gateways” project by Victoria University (Mountford, 2011) has been implemented to reach out to low SES residents in the community and facilitate their pathway to tertiary education through career counselling, recognition of prior learning and workshop and training opportunities. The project is driven by the university and engages 40 local organisations including education providers, councils, libraries and centres. However, it appears this project’s primary focus is to attract students, rather than supporting current students through their study programs.

Another recent example is a collaborative partnership between Open Universities Australia (OUA) and a selection of public libraries (OUA, 2015). The project encourages students to use their local library as part of their study experience. Townsville City Council’s Thuringowa Central branch, the only library in Queensland to be involved at present, offers a welcome and information session, that aims to familiarise students with the facilities available at their local library and, potentially, connect with other students (Townsville City Council, 2015). Little is known about the success of this project, however it is understood that the project provided for the exchange of information and cross-promotion of services that led to an increase of awareness of public library services.

### **Research aims**

Given their place within local communities, the public library service is identified as somewhere university students may turn for assistance with their studies. Little is understood both in a conceptual and practical sense, about how a university can extend support for students located in regional areas by working with public library services.

The aim of this research was to explore this idea. This was achieved by gaining an understanding of how university students completing tertiary studies from regional areas were currently being supported by their public library service. This included:

- what was understood to be university students’ support needs and current use of the public library services;
- challenges associated with providing support to university students, and
- opportunities for new and/or different support services and where universities could potentially provide assistance to public libraries in supporting university students’ success in regional areas.

## Method

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is a lead provider of on-campus and distance education programs in Australia, and provided the site and context for this qualitative study. In 2015, USQ had nearly 20 000 students enrolled in programs and nearly three quarters of all enrolments are distance education students (USQ, 2014, pp.37-38). As a regional university, USQ is committed to meeting the learning needs of its students, including finding new ways to engage with the student community and developing improvements to learning experiences and success. It is important to note that this study was concerned with exploring how universities, and public libraries could work together. It was not focussed solely on the university library working with the public library. Whilst the university library is an important support for student learning and study needs, it is not the only location in a university providing this type of support (e.g. study and learning support is provided by student hubs, learning centres, academics). Also, the types of tertiary courses (including MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) in which regional students were enrolled had no bearing on the research design.

Data collection took the form of semi-structured interviews, conducted via phone and Skype at a mutually agreed time between the researcher and participants. Semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to explore influences associated with participants' lived experience as it related to their working environment (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). This method was also chosen as a way of minimising barriers to participate in the study, such as limited time and resources. Indicative questions include:

- What services and resources do you provide (if any) to support the study and learning needs of university students?
- What challenges have you had in supporting the study and learning needs of university students?
- What new or different resources or services would you like to introduce?
- How could universities help the public library to provide study and learning support to students?

One researcher was recruited and conducted all participant interviews to ensure consistency.

A homogeneous sampling method was undertaken to derive data pertinent to the research aims. The sample was based on "membership in a sub-group that has defining characteristics" (Creswell, 2012, p. 208).

Queensland regional public library services, located outside of metro (e.g. Brisbane) and not near-metro areas (e.g. Sunshine Coast and Gold Coast) and with students within the public library service area completing study either 'by distance' or 'mixed mode' were invited to participate. These regional public library services were identified using the University of Southern Queensland 2015 enrolment data. Contact details were obtained via the Public Library Network online directory that is available via the State Library of Queensland. Participants were initially invited to participate in the study by email, sent to 'whole of library service' managerial positions, such as branch librarian or manager of a library with the (parent) regional council. A total of 22 public library services in regional areas of Queensland were contacted.

Nine participants from Queensland regional public library services agreed to participate in the study. All participants were in managerial positions within their public library service, ranging from ‘whole of library service’ manager to managers of particular areas within the public library service such as collections and resources.

### *Data analysis*

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Following the transcription of all participant interviews, a thematic analysis was undertaken. Thematic analysis involves “searching across a data set to find repeated patterns of meaning” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 86). The process begins when patterns and issues of potential interest start to emerge, and finishes when data driven themes are identified – main and sub-themes, and the ‘story’ they tell about the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 92). Coding of the data identified categories, which were refined through constant comparison, led to the main themes and the ‘story’ within the data.

### **Findings**

Three themes were identified from the interview data which describe the current landscape of university student learning support found within participating, Queensland public libraries located in regional areas:

- University students’ needs are complex.
- The public library is for ‘all learning’.
- The public library as ‘host’ for university study and learning support.

Each of these is explored in detail below.

#### *University students’ needs are complex*

It was found that university students’ learning support needs were largely unknown by the participating regional public library services. This was demonstrated through a combination of limited evidence gathering by public libraries to inform any specific support services to university students, and a lack of information exchange between participating public libraries and universities reported by at least five of the nine participants. All participants were open to suggestions about how they could partake in providing learning support services to university students in their local area. However, participants made clear that the public library had limited resources available to provide any specific service to university students, and indicated that universities would need to provide the information and means to do so.

Information about university students such as what is being taught on campus related to information literacy; the number of university students in the local area, and the technology needed by university students, were identified as necessary to inform service delivery.

*“... we’d be relying on universities and tertiary institutions to give us that information because you have it, you know.” (Participant 5)*

From the participants’ perspective, university students were identified, or assumed to have complex or mixed needs, making them undistinguishable from other groups within the public library

community. Limited, suitable materials within public library collections were one defining factor pertaining to “complex”, university student needs. In addition, within a rural community, a public library user may have more than one purpose for visiting a public library and as such, have mixed or unidentifiable needs pertaining to a seemingly small group within the public library community.

*“...we would have a very mixed number of people with mixed needs, and they might have part of their time being a student as well as other things in the community.” (Participant 5)*

It was found that this limited awareness and knowledge of learning support needs of university students might potentially lead to unmet expectations. The following scenario describes a situation whereby a university student believed the public library would have what they need for their study.

*“So we do get the external students, so they need access to...all those sorts of things that a university student needs and that they would go to their library for. And they...a lot of them seem to have that expectation well, we're a library so we would have it.” (Participant 1)*

Particularly as those new to university study discover that the level of academic material needed for coursework cannot be found at the public library, according to most participants, are directed back to the university for support and service specific to their needs.

*“So we will buy them if they look general enough, but generally, our feedback to those of those customers wanting them - those students - is no, you know, you need to go to your own university.” (Participant 3)*

Participants of this study referred to university students as a minority, or even a non-existent user group within the public library service community. Almost all participants expressed a level of complexity and specificity that can't be met by a public library. Not 'general' enough for a public library, learning support and resource needs of university students are believed to sit outside what a public library provides for its community.

*The public library is for “all learning”*

A question of scope arose from all participant interviews – is it the public library's role to provide learning support to university students? All participants viewed the roles of the public library and an academic library as distinctively different, and with responsibility to its respective community – a public library to its local community and an academic library to its university's student community. With specific needs to be met, and expertise perceived to be required of providing learning support to university students, participants viewed this kind of service out of scope of what a public library can provide.

As Participant 1 put it:

*“Like university libraries tend to provide those study skills and information literacy skills sessions. We would argue that a university should provide that somehow, whether the student is full-time on campus or external studies.” (Participant 1)*

Seemingly in contrast however, over half of the participants directly expressed a responsibility to cater for 'all learning' within the public library service community. Participant 1 expressed that the

mission of public libraries is to provide access to learning; the public library is for all community learning and is a 'neutral' space that is free, welcoming and "encourages learning and discovery".

*"...it's not losing sight of our core mission, which is to serve our general community and it's not to try and be something that we're not - not to try and exclude existing members in order to bring in uni students." (Participant 1)*

All participants believed it was important to balance the needs of the different user groups within their local communities, with the resources required to meet them, particularly with regards to the collection. Resources available are general, not specific academic material, but sufficient enough to meet a broad range of information needs.

*"Mainly our collections are not focussed on resources that are academic. We don't carry a lot of those. We have more general collections. We do say, if people ask about academic material, that we don't generally supply that, we supply stuff that's going to be used by the majority, I guess, of the community." (Participant 7)*

The learning support needs of university students can only be met via the generic resources that are available to the local community. This includes the collection, resources and spaces - the use of these 'fit within the mission' of public libraries.

*The public library as 'host' for university study and learning support.*

From a content and 'know how' perspective, all participants reported limiting factors on the public library service's capacity to deliver on university students' learning support needs. Over half of participants described 'support' as providing access to academic materials which was identified as a key concern. However, as a 'connector' and 'host', participants saw possibility in what support could be provided to students. Five participants described experiences of assisting university students with connecting to the 'right' service and materials they need for study. It is explained to these students that while the public library may not have the materials they need, the university library (should) will have a service specifically for external students. Participant 1 provided an example of assisting a university student access services.

*"...just doing that basic information navigation with the student to help get them on the way, I think that face-to-face help doing that sort of thing, that confidence-building - I refer to it as 'hand holding'... you really are just holding their hand for the first few steps and saying "Look, we'll step through it together" and "Oh okay, I can see you're on your way now. You've got your balance, off you go", kind of thing." (Participant 1)*

This example also highlights how a public library can provide encouragement for new or returning university students. As a place for 'all learning' public libraries may be the first point of contact for these students needing to become familiar with accessing and using resources.

While participants described their public library as having limited access to academic materials and expertise, the availability of technology and space within public libraries were highlighted as a resource potentially meeting the learning support needs of university students in their local area. As a space and 'host' for university study, the public library service is an equipped workspace. Over half of the participants of this study described being able to provide exam supervision, as well as a place where university students could find a space for quiet and collaborative study, to charge



devices and have access to printing. A third of participants mentioned the use of the public library Wi-Fi and Internet, computers and space, including rooms for hosting study groups or sessions.

*“So say, for example, there might be a session where you're going to use videoconference or a webinar to do that similar sort of service. I could see us using a public library space to set up a data projector and speakers and whatever and do that, whether it's with one or two people or a bigger group.” (Participant 1)*

Participant 2 reflected on how public libraries were evolving as “a meeting place” and a place for the community to come together; the library as ‘meeting place’ fitting with what university students need for their study.

*“...the library is becoming more of a meeting place, a social communication place. So I would probably see that as mirroring what university students would require. I'm just thinking that we've got a meeting room here, you know, whether that could be utilised for get-togethers and tutorials and things like that.” (Participant 2)*

Participant 6 also described a recently formed study group and that the public library service will host regular meet-ups and connect students to overcome feelings of isolation. Further to this, another participant described the public library space as a ‘de-stress zone’ away from study, with students using the fiction collection and space to ‘chill out’, making the public library true to its scope and service availability – a multi-use space, ideal for undertaking university study.

## **Discussion**

University students’ learning support needs are believed to be complex and specific, and meeting them is potentially out of scope of what the public library already provides to meet a broad range of information needs in its local community. Findings of this study appear consistent with what Behr and LaDell-Thomas found about the views of public library staff in serving distance students concluding, “patron groups are blurring” (2014, p. 158). The majority of respondents did not consider distance education students to be a specific user group within their communities (Behr and LaDell-Thomas, 2014, p. 153). It must be recognised however, that technological advances and online delivery becoming the most dominant platform for distance education will likely increase participation in tertiary study and other (formal) learning opportunities (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p.6). Sometime in the near future, it is reasonable to assume that university students undertaking courses by distance (and in regional areas) may expect some degree of learning support - direction and/or guidance, from their public library.

Participants of this study made clear that a public library is not an academic library. Public libraries serve a range of information needs within their communities, a broad range of needs to be carefully balanced in order to provide the welcoming and inclusive environment they strive to be. This is well asserted in earlier literature about public library services supporting academic study, the libraries’ collection as the lens for this view (Power and Keenan, 1991; Scilken, 1993 as cited in Behr and LaDell-Thomas, 2014). However, more recently, the public library as a ‘distraction-free zone’ for study, as well as the provision of exam supervision, and the use of group study spaces and meeting rooms have been recognised as services that could be used by university students (Nickel and Mulvihill, 2010; Behr and LaDell-Thomas, 2014). Findings of this study suggest that public libraries are potentially an ideal ‘host’ for university study, with the availability of spaces and

technology, such as data projectors, printers and Internet, as well as a peer-to-peer ‘connector’ within their local area, and ‘way finder’ for students to access learning support services from the university. Consistent with the view of public library staff surveyed by Behr and LaDell-Thomas that public libraries “give the same level of service as all other patrons” to university students, participants of this study stipulated that supporting university students with what is already provided to the community, adheres to the mission that public libraries are for all learning.

Earlier literature sought to understand why students would visit libraries other than their home university library to seek resources and support. In a UK study of distance education students’ use of libraries, it was found that the local public library was where students turned, primarily due to geographical accessibility and availability (Stephens, Unwin and Bolton, 1997). More recently in the US, Behr and LaDell-Thomas (2014) explored why distance students would choose non-academic libraries, the impact of this use and the views of public libraries serving distance students. Behr and LaDell-Thomas concluded that distance students would benefit from collaboration between different types of libraries to help them locate and use resources and services that matched their needs and improve their experience (2014, p. 158). In Australia, studies related to challenges, initiatives and progress in improving distance-learning experiences by using technology have focused on pedagogy and course design and access to course learning materials (Forsyth, Pizzica, Laxton and Mahony, 2010; Lowrie and Jorgensen, 2012, and Bossu, Bull and Brown, 2012). This study took a broader view of not just library services focused on resources and research, not the teaching of course content, but universities providing academic learning support services to students completing programs in regional areas. Findings of this study suggest that within scope of what each provides to their users and communities, universities and public libraries could work together to support regional student success.

This study provides insight to the learning support currently being provided by public library services to university students completing programs in regional areas. In addition, this study has raised the issue of how public library services need to be supported to facilitate the extension of university learning support services. Collaboration between universities and public library services needs to be co-ordinated and complementary to the roles and responsibilities of both. Planning could involve targeted and/or impacted public library services towards minimising the burden and maximising the impact of effort (Behr and LaDell-Thomas, 2014, p. 144). Universities and public library services could work together to increase, 1) awareness of the roles and services with both the student cohort and public library staff, and 2) connection through communication, information exchange and even collection access. Behr and LaDell-Thomas found that public library staff felt that students needed to be better informed about the services available at their university (2014, p. 154). This appears consistent with the participants’ experience in this study, that they felt the need to help direct students to the ‘right service’.

Information exchange between the university and public libraries would be necessary to maintain openness in communication and keep public libraries up to date with key services such as information literacy classes. Connection between the university and public library service, two-way communication and information sharing, including enrolments, courses and support services information, was identified by participants in this study as necessary to improve learning support services to university students within their local areas. Therefore, working in these roles will fulfil

needs for better connection between public libraries and universities, as well as enhanced university presence in university student learning experiences in regional areas.

### *Limitations and future research*

Participant recruitment for this qualitative study involved identifying public library services in regional areas with USQ student enrolments. The use of these criteria best enabled the research approach to meet its aims. However, the researchers note that the findings of this small-scale study are indicative only. Given the USQ context for this study, the resulting number of participants and limited geographic scope of the study of being within Queensland, it is therefore not possible to draw generalisations from the data – across universities, nor nation-wide. This includes ‘concrete’ options and possible ways in which universities and public libraries could work together to provide learning support services.

Despite less than half of invited public library services participating in this study, it is hoped that this exploratory study initiates further dialogue between universities and public libraries towards improving the way learning support services engage with students completing programs in regional areas. Perspectives from students, as well as university staff involved in providing learning support services, would help to gain a clearer understanding of issues. In addition to this, the researchers identify that an understanding of the needs of students and public libraries across Australia would also be beneficial and valuable in delivering improved reach for university learning support services.

### **Conclusion**

As Australian universities seek new ways to engage and support student success, particularly those studying in regional areas of Australia, and recognising the impact of a university presence in regional and rural communities, working with public library services presents an opportunity to extend learning support to this student cohort. This study explored this idea of universities and public library services working together to support regional student success. Findings provide a snapshot within the Australian context of how public libraries are serving to support university students – challenges, opportunities and associated issues.

Public libraries are well placed within their communities to support student learning. While university students are not readily identified as a user group within the public library community, participants of this study believe to be in tune with their community’s needs and seek to balance these to make the space inclusive, welcoming and for ‘all learning’. As an equipped workspace with rooms and various technologies available, and general information assistance, public libraries are an ideal ‘connector’ and ‘host’ for university study. Working within responsibility and scope to respective communities, universities and public library services could potentially identify where better connection between services can be made and how each can have a role in the university student learning experience.

Findings of this study are indicative only and further research and understanding about regional and remote students’ learning support needs for their success, and the capacity of both universities and public library services will be needed to better inform the possibility of an effective and meaningful collaboration.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Australian public library staff who generously contributed their time and thoughts to this research project.

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