

The provision of information services



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The recent survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (November 1999) on internet usage shows that 800 000 people accessed the internet through public libraries. Statistics such as these illustrate the significant role libraries play in the provision of information services. They reflect the enterprise with which the sector has embraced technological developments and taken advantage of initiatives such as Networking the Nation to expand and improve services. However, it will be interesting to see whether usage increases or decreases over the next few years.

It would also be interesting to see how the rural/city divide is represented and whether infrastructure problems can be sufficiently overcome. Granted, being information poor is not only a consequence of living in a rural area but where you live can certainly compound problems of access and the quality and quantity of information resources. The recent national inquiry into rural and remote education undertaken by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has collected a great deal of evidence and, according to the commissioner Chris Sidoti, it is good that the work of the inquiry is being presented when attention is on rural needs.

As a contributor to the inquiry the Association (<http://www.alia.org.au/submissions/rural.remote.html>) was invited to attend a briefing by the Commission in March. The key question for the inquiry was 'what is necessary to ensure that, by the age of eighteen, each child in Australia has received the education he or she requires to participate to his or her full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the community'. The inquiry can provide the answers but it is beyond the Commission's power to provide the solutions, that will require the collaboration of each sector of government and an integrated approach. The commitment of parents, students, teachers, specialist and support services and the community is already there.

In a break from the usual publishing pattern for inquiry reports, the Commission will publish six documents. The first, *Emerging themes*, was released in late March and is the 'words and stories'. This will be followed by the *Executive summary and recommendations* to be tabled in June, then *Informa-*

tion technologies in education, *Access to education*, *Indigenous education* in July, and *Rural Students with special needs* at a later date.

Access and quality are consistent themes in every aspect of the inquiry. Information technology has the potential to address quality of teaching and services issues and inaccessibility to choice of subjects, curriculum content, learning resources, specialist and support services, but because of communication difficulties and lack of information technology and information skills is actually making rural disadvantage greater. Students were particularly critical of the library (and sporting) facilities at their schools. All states and governments have plans for the provision of computers and access to the internet in rural schools however these programs vary in the level of resources and do not always extend to remotely isolated children or non-government schools. Telstra claims to be spending approximately \$3 billion over the next three years on the provision of new services to rural and regional Australia and to be meeting its universal service obligations, a claim which will no doubt be debated in the government inquiry recently announced and to which the Association is preparing a submission.

Underlying much of the evidence is a need for a different approach to funding education in rural and remote areas — one which emphasises quality over cost. The Commission is yet to make recommendations. Hopefully it will point out the longer term employment, social, economic and cultural benefits of adopting such a different approach and not ignore the role school, public and joint use libraries play.

1999 financial audit results

I am very pleased to report that our auditor, PricewaterhouseCoopers, has completed the financial audit and that the Association has returned to profit with a posted net return of \$114 309.59 — this can be attributed to the endeavours of divisions and conference committees, good investment strategies and expenditure constraint generally.

Our financial management aims are two-fold — to ensure that as much benefit as possible can be made available to members; and that the longer-term financial future of the Association is secure. ■