



ALIA 2006 Biennial Conference



Australian Library and
Information Association

Refereed Paper

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Libraries without librarians are just a room full of books: a study of NSW Corrective Services

Abstract

Libraries in correctional centres are traditionally just repositories of old, second hand books, staffed (if at all) by any inmate who happens to be passing through, who likes a quiet, inside job. The NSW Department of Corrective Services is attempting to turn this situation around with a number of innovative strategies. The first step was to centralise the management and budget of all libraries (staff and inmate) under a single manager. This has enabled the supply of new, good quality library resources in a cost effective and coordinated manner. It also quarantines the library budget from being used to pay for other gaol related activities, as has happened in the past. The next step has been to provide properly qualified staff for these libraries, to ensure that these improved resources are used effectively. The budget is not adequate to employ outside staff for all the libraries (currently there are 42), and so inmates are recruited for the position of Inmate Library Clerk and offered the opportunity to complete a recognised training qualification in library science. They are maintained in that position for a specified time period and paid at a competitive rate, according to a scale, which is suitable for the role and related to the training component. This paper will discuss the challenges and opportunities of implementing and operating this system and the resulting advantages of this system for the Inmate Library Clerk, other inmates and the staff in NSW correctional centres.

Introduction

Libraries in correctional centres are traditionally just repositories of old, second hand books, staffed (if at all) by any inmate who happens to be passing through, who likes a quiet, inside job. The NSW Department of Corrective Services is attempting to turn this situation around with a number of innovative strategies including dedicated funding and management, centralized purchasing, improved facilities and professional library training for inmate library clerks.

Background

The NSW Department of Corrective Services currently has over 9000 individuals incarcerated in 34 correctional centres around the state, with another one currently being built, and a further one in planning (NSW Department of Corrective Services, 2005). Within the centres there are between 1 and 4 libraries, as a result of various physical barriers, security restrictions and limitations on inmate movements. Library services are provided to these inmates through an integrated system which includes centralised purchasing of resources for the libraries. In general the libraries are staffed by inmate library clerks, under the local supervision of the Senior Correctional Education Officer or Correctional Education Officer. Professional supervision is provided by the Manager, Library Services. There are also 2 larger, professionally staffed libraries located at the Corrective Services Academy (for the use of departmental staff) and the Metropolitan Remand & Reception Centre (MRRRC) – for the use of inmates & all legal queries. Inmates who are on remand

(that is, not sentenced yet) have the greatest requirements for legal information. To assist with this situation there is an additional professional Librarian providing legal information services locally in 3 Western Sydney Remand Centres. This is an unusual situation in Australia, however, as shown by the results of a survey of inmate libraries conducted by the author (see: Appendix I). Although all centres in other states said that they had libraries, these libraries are generally managed by education staff, correctional staff or volunteers who are without any library qualifications or experience. Most have inmates working in the libraries, but only one inmate had any library qualifications. Many libraries have very small budgets, if there is a budget at all, often surviving only on donations for their new stock. In Western Australia they are planning to enter into an agreement with the State Library to improve their libraries and provide access to some professional librarians' expertise (personal communication). The situation overseas is somewhat better, with many libraries being staffed by professional librarians (Prison Library Clearinghouse, 2006; Alcock, 1988; Bailey et al, 1981; Clark, 1992; Coyle, 1987; Engelbarts, 1972; Gulker, 1973; Joel, 1990; Library Association, 1981; Maryland Correctional Education Libraries, 2002; Vogel, 1994; Vogel, 1995).

There are currently 42 libraries in the 34 correctional centres in NSW, with more being expected to come on line, as new centres are built. However it may be difficult for inmates to access the libraries. For example there may be problems with correctional staff

shortages. There is a rule within the centres that a correctional officer is required to be in the library (or education area, when the library is located there) when inmates are present. If there are not enough officers to staff the rest of the centre, then the officer in the library or education area is often “stripped” (i.e. taken away to do other duties), and then the inmates are not allowed to attend the library or education centre.

The standard of these libraries varies greatly (Dudeney, 2001; Inspector-General of Corrective Services, 2001; NSW Department of Corrective Services, 2001), but in general most are far below the Australian Library & Information Association and international standards (American Correctional Association & American Library Association, 1975; American Library Association, 1992; Australian Correctional Administrators, 2004; ALIA, 1990; Lehmann & Locke, 2005; Office of the United National High Commission for Human Rights, 2003; Shirley, 2003). A few libraries have historically been well staffed with inmates and had relatively up-to-date book resources, computer equipment, a catalogue and a circulation system. However, the majority of them have had very old resources, no computers, circulation or cataloguing systems, and very few, if any, staff to operate the library, and these are all unskilled. The inmate clerks are often only transient and have little or no knowledge of how to manage a library. When inmates who could potentially develop into good inmate library clerks have been identified, they would often not stay long because the pay was so low in comparison with the other work that they could do for

Corrective Services Industries. The education staff who are in charge of the libraries are mostly interested in the work, but have many other calls on their time and are often unable to give much attention to the library. In some cases, although they would like to be more involved, they have found it difficult to justify the time required to their managers, as it was not a required part of their duties. Recently the Award has been altered to include these duties, so hopefully this will be less of a problem. The lack of regular, trained inmate library clerks also increases their workload, as they constantly have to find new inmate staff and train them.

The location of the libraries is often in or near the education centre. This can be an advantage as it may allow inmates to have free access to the library when the education centre is open, without the need for a correctional officer or education officer to be present in the library, as they are already in the education area in general. However, if the education centre is small, the library is sometimes used as a classroom and this can be a problem with the resulting noise or reduced access. The libraries vary from quite spacious rooms with good lighting, to others with very small areas, and one at least has had no defined space, instead using a few cupboards in various room of the education area to store books. At least two libraries have had major structural problems which prevented the rooms being used at all. For example there have been leaking roofs, which led to waterfalls down the walls or asbestos in the walls which made the rooms uninhabitable. Even in the newer centres the space available for libraries is sometimes quite restricted or non-

existent. For example the correctional centres at Kempsey and Windsor (Dillwynia) were built at the same time (2004-5). However one has a quite large and well equipped library, while the other has a small room that no inmates ever get to – the entire service is provided with a delivery trolley.

Although many years ago there was once a centralized service for providing books to the centers and regular seminars for librarians employed in the correctional centers (AIC, 1977; AIC 1981; AIC 1992; Iltis, 1986; John, 1988; Mugford, 1984), from the late 1980s until 2003 the funding for inmate libraries was managed through the local correctional centre budget, usually within the education budget (personal communication). This resulted in very uneven spending in the centres. If there was a need for the money to be spent in other areas, such as course enrollments, overtime, equipment etc. nothing would be spent on the libraries, and any new books would usually come from donations of often old and unwanted materials from many sources. A few centres had active acquisition programs, but these have been very much in the minority. This has been despite the huge need for resources within the correctional centres to assist the inmates with their educational, recreational and informational needs (Siemer, A., Toops, A., Roberts, L., and Smith, R., 2005).

Only a few of the libraries have a circulation and cataloguing system, and of these, there have been instances where it has been accidentally deleted from the system, and they have had to start all over again. The result of this is that there is a very large loss rate of

books and other library resources and the remaining books located are all over the correctional centre (sometimes being used as doorstops!), with no record being kept of where anything is. When inmates are moved to other centres or go home, any books in their possession are often allowed to go with them. It is also not unknown for the person cleaning the cells after an inmate leaves to throw any books found there into a garbage bin, rather than taking the time to return them to the library.

Libraries into the Future

The Manager, Library Services undertook a review of the system in 2004 and this has resulted in a number of recommendations being made to improve the situation in the correctional centre libraries. They have focused on the provision of the basic requirements for a functional library: a location, a collection, and trained staff. The locations of the libraries within the correctional centres are in many cases unable to be improved at the present time, due to a general lack of space in the centres. This is so even in the newer areas, and is not just for libraries. It is intended that this will be the target in future years for special funding. In the meantime the current facilities have been upgraded by the installation of new shelving, magazine racks, trolleys etc. During 2005-6 there has been work with Correctional Services Industries to design and build specialized trolleys and book return bins for use within the centres.

The NSW Department of Corrective Services has addressed the previously inadequate provision of resources to the inmate libraries, by centralizing the

management and resource acquisition budget across the state. This has enabled coordinated and bulk purchasing of resources with the resulting economies of scale that were not previously possible. There have been considerable savings as a result of this. For example we were able to obtain a specific magazine title for \$8 per annum per copy for 50 copies that would normally have cost \$70 per annum for one copy. We were also able to have the latest copy of Harry Potter ready to go to every centre as soon as it was published – again for a much reduced price. We are able to take purchasing suggestions from specific centres and ensure that all libraries receive the title, if it is appropriate. However, even with adequate resources libraries cannot function properly without trained library staff who are able to ensure that the resources in the library are available and accessible. All libraries require regular staffing by individuals who understand the required duties and are able to carry them out. Inmate libraries are no different. Managing a library is a skilled position that may be remunerated quite well outside the correctional centres. Unfortunately therefore staffing all of the inmate libraries with professional library staff is not possible because of the expense.

Previously inmate library clerks have been given little or no training and often do the job for a very short period of time, and make up the systems as they go along. This is not an unusual situation. A recent survey of gaols in Australia and overseas (conducted by the author) has revealed that there are no systematic programs in place to ensure that the inmates who work in the

libraries are adequately trained or gain qualifications in this field. The result is that the majority of inmate libraries are very poorly run and provide substandard services to the inmates. This has resulted in many complaints by inmates to authorities such as the Ombudsman.

Inmate library clerks could and should be educated in the requirements of the job, by a recognised library-training organisation. This provides a benefit for the Department, the other inmates using the libraries as well as for the library clerks when they are released, especially if they choose to pursue employment in the library sector. It ensures a better managed library, which benefits the other inmates and it assists in fulfilling the Department's aim to rehabilitate offenders in order to reduce re-offending. The appropriate starting qualification has been determined to be the Certificate III in Library and Information Services, which will enable successful candidates to obtain employment as Library Assistants when they are no longer in the Departments custody. Some inmates who have demonstrated particular interest in the subject, and who are in the system for long enough, should also be able to complete the Diploma in Library and Information Services, which will enable them to obtain employment as a Library Technician. There are problems for those who want to pursue a Librarian degree as the courses tend to be only available using the Internet, which is of course not available to NSW inmates. However they may be able to obtain a generalist undergraduate degree while in custody, and if they choose they could then obtain a postgraduate librarian degree when they leave the correctional centre.

It is important that the inmate library clerks be allowed to remain in the job for a reasonable amount of time (i.e. preferably at least 12 months) and work holds are arranged to ensure that this happens. The amount they are paid must also be enough to compete with Corrective Services Industries wages for other gaol-based industries, as otherwise the libraries lose potentially good inmate library staff because of the pay differentials. After extensive negotiations the pay rates for inmate library clerks have been increased and are linked to the training option, in order to make the job and the training together a more attractive alternative. It is intended that when there are graduates of the Diploma course a further pay rise will be made available for them – this will involve further negotiations with the paymasters – Corrective Services Industries. There should also, where possible, be a succession plan in place to ensure that the library is staffed continuously with inmates who are either trained or in training. This will enable new staff to be given basic training in local policies and procedures before the previous occupant leaves.

The Library Training Course

Once it was agreed in principle that a library training program should be commenced, a number of difficulties were encountered. Very few courses are available in Australia for Library Technicians that can be done by distance education. It was necessary that this course be done exclusively by distance, because of the limited number of teachers available and the distance of many correctional centres from library training venues. Another issue involved the cost of the course. Small

correctional centres with limited budgets cannot afford to spend thousands of dollars on a single inmate, to the detriment of other inmates in the centres who are doing other courses. The content of the course is also difficult to deliver with no access to the internet being possible for the student.

The Manager, Library Services and the staff at the Inmate Education Department (AEVTI) consulted a number of Registered Training Organizations about the possibility of conducting this course with the inmates, and quotations were sought for the cost of providing the course. Overall there was little enthusiasm from many Registered Training Organizations, especially in view of the lack of internet access, and the exclusively distance education mode of delivery. Others were interested but the costs were prohibitive. It was particularly surprising that the Library Unit at TAFE NSW showed very little interest in the course, as they could have developed it for this department and then used it later with other distant students. There is currently no distance library education course being offered by TAFE NSW. Library students in NSW who are not able to attend TAFE either use interstate colleges such as at Box Hill or a commercial Registered Training Organizations like Docmatrix. A number of quotes were finally obtained and Workplace Australia Group was selected as the preferred Registered Training Organizations, on the basis of the cost and that they displayed the most interest in, and understanding of, the requirements of this project.

The pilot for the course began in September 2005 with four inmate library

clerks in four correctional centres in the Sydney metropolitan area. The decision was made to have the first students in the local area so that the Manager, Library Services could visit them and closely monitor the progression of the course, to make sure that it would meet the needs of more distant students when the time came to roll it out to them. The Corrective Services Academy Library also purchased multiple copies of the required textbooks that would be loaned to the students when they needed them. The course required some information to be obtained from the internet. This was addressed in one of three methods: either the information was downloaded by the Manager, Library Service and saved onto CDs which were sent to the students as required or CDs were obtained free from database vendors such as Ebsco or pseudo-internet CDs were commissioned and paid for by the department.

Some of the competencies for the course were general ones that the students were able to learn within the normal teaching program at the correctional centre (e.g. Information technology related units). Some of the students therefore had previous qualifications and/or experience or were able to undertake these courses at the centres, which were of assistance in the completion of the course. They were therefore able to obtain recognition of prior learning for some segment of the course (e.g. Certificate III in Information Technology). The Registered Training Organizations provided the course materials and the Manager Library Services has provided telephone or personal tutoring to the students as required.

One particularly challenging aspect of conducting the course was in teaching the students how to search databases that are often only available on the Internet. This was approached in two ways. Firstly the vendors of a range of databases were approached and asked for CD copies of their databases (e.g. Informit, Ebsco). These companies were very helpful in supplying them when they discovered the object of the course. In addition, as a result of a discussion with the National Library, we were approached by another vendor (Web-Ezy Solutions) who designs distant education modules for various libraries to assist their patrons to learn how to use their online databases. They agreed, for a fee, to develop the internet-like software and to have it put onto a CD that could be distributed to the students. The students were therefore able to work through the training CD, then proceed to do real searches on the real CD databases. The training CD includes sections on how to use the internet, Informit, Ebsco, Ovid and Libraries Australia (the National Library catalogue).

As of June 2006 we have one graduate of the Certificate III, with 3 others very close to completion. We have now begun discussions with the Registered Training Organization on the next phase of the program which will be to roll-out the Certificate IV and Diploma section of the course to selected students. We are also in discussions on offering the program either to the Senior Correctional Education Officers or Education Officers (whoever is in charge of the libraries on-site). This will enable them to extend their qualifications, as well as providing professionally trained staff within the

correctional centres, who will be able to assist the inmate students as they progress through the course. This will be particularly important in the regional areas. Eventually it may be that Library qualifications will be a requirement for people who apply for these positions. It is hoped that when the qualified inmate library clerks are able to participate in the work and education release phase of their sentence, it will be possible to arrange for some of this work to be done in libraries. The Corrective Services Academy Library will be accepting some inmate library clerks in this program, and would welcome other libraries to also participate. The intention is to give those inmates some experience in an "outside" library which they will be able to use to help them obtain employment on their release from custody.

Opportunities and Challenges

Organising the library training course has been a time consuming but very rewarding project.

Some of the difficulties that we have dealt with have included the following.

- Registered Training Organizations - lack of interest and understanding of the requirements of this student population & high costs of the courses.
- Occasional difficulties in finding and keeping students with the requisite commitment, interest and educational abilities.
- Lack of understanding among some departmental staff that libraries should be operated by trained and qualified staff.
- Funding – limited funds are available for such specialized training. This was resolved by creating a separate

centralized budget to pay for this training, rather than having each centre pay for their own student.

However there have also been many highlights in the project such as:

- enthusiasm of the students who are committed to doing the course, and running their libraries well;
- interest and enthusiasm from those Registered Training Organizations who did understand the importance of the project and were willing to be flexible enough to make it work;
- willingness of the database vendors who supplied materials gratis to assist the students in their work;
- helpfulness and enthusiasm of the education staff in the centres and in head office who have either volunteered to assist the students in their course and their work in the libraries or assisted in the establishment of the course; and
- the thrill of seeing a "real" library begin to take shape, where there was nothing (or very little) there before

Conclusion

The inmate library clerk training course has led to clear improvements within the libraries where the students are situated. It has given the inmate library clerks knowledge and skills which they have been using on a day-to-day basis within their centres. It has also introduced many inmates to the possibility of working in the library and information industry, which they had never considered before. The most frequent comment they make is "I would never have thought to work in a library, but I've discovered that it's a great job". Hopefully it will give them the

opportunity to make changes in their lives when they leave custody. This will of course depend on their commitment to changing their behaviour, but it will also depend on the willingness of employers to give them the opportunity to change their lives.

The inmate libraries in NSW correctional centres have been undergoing a change

in management, resources and facilities that will eventually result in a much improved access to library and information services for the inmates incarcerated in these centres. If libraries without Librarians are just a room full of books, then the collections of books within the NSW correctional centres will soon be able to validly be called libraries.

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