

Libraries without librarians are just a room full of books: educating Inmate Library Clerks, for now and for their future

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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 40), 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, and professional library training for Inmate Library Clerks.

Background

The NSW Department of Corrective Services currently has over 9000 individuals incarcerated in 30 correctional centres around the state. Library

services are provided to these inmates through an integrated system consisting of centralised purchasing of resources for the libraries. Within the centres there are between 1 and 4 libraries, due to various physical barriers, security restrictions and limitations on inmate movements. 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 staff and the Metropolitan Remand & Reception Centre (MRRC) – for inmates & legal queries. Inmates who are on remand have the greatest requirements for legal information. To assist with this situation there is an additional professional Librarian providing local legal information services 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 stated that they had libraries, their 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. This may be changing in Western Australia where they are planning to enter into an agreement with the State Library to improve their libraries and provide access to some professional librarians' expertise. The situation overseas is somewhat better, with many libraries being staffed with professional librarians.

There are currently 42 libraries in the 30 correctional centres in NSW, with more being expected as new centres are built or taken over. Inmate access to many libraries is very restricted due to local rules and regulations, and frequent lock-downs in some centres which prevent any reasonable access at all. The standard of these libraries varies greatly, but in general most are far below the Australian Library & Information Association standards. 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. The majority however have had very old resources, no computers, circulation or cataloguing systems, and very little, if any, inmate staff. 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 were found, they would often not stay long because the pay was so low in comparison with other work 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. 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. However, if the education centre is small, the library is sometimes used as a classroom and there 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 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. For example there have been leaking roofs, which led to waterfalls down the walls and no electricity or asbestos which made the rooms inhabitable. Even in newer centres the space available for libraries is quite restricted or non-existent.

Although there was once a centralized service for providing books to the centres, in recent years the funding for the libraries has been managed through the local correctional centre budget, usually the education budget. This has 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 have had active acquisition programs, but these have been very much in the minority.

Only a few of the libraries have used a circulation and cataloguing system. The result of this is that there is a large loss rate of books and other library resources and the remaining books 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 any books in their possession are often allowed to go with them. It is not unknown for the person cleaning the cells to throw any books found there into a garbage bin, rather than taking the time to return them to the library. There is also a large amount of loss resulting from the staff taking books home and keeping them. In relation to magazines, there is additional loss even before they get to the library. In many centres the magazines disappear from the mailroom and are never delivered to the person to whom they are addressed. The education officers in many centres have to pick the magazines up directly from the newsagents in order to ensure a steady supply.

There is very little staff Internet access within the correctional centres, even in administration and other non-inmate areas. The staff are generally unaware that they could have access to the Internet, even if the computers were available for them, which they generally aren't. There are very few, if any, Internet Kiosks available for staff to use, and generally the staff don't have the required logins and passwords. This makes the work of the education staff, very difficult as many external courses prefer curriculum materials to be downloaded from the Internet. Often the staff have to do this on their home computers. The departmental Library Service has subscribed to many very useful online resources, which the majority of departmental staff are unable to access at work because of this lack of Internet access. This is a severe under usage of

departmental resources and funds. The Library at the MRRC (which has professional Library staff) also does not have access to the Internet, which prevents the Library staff from easily providing information to inmates and staff. This Library is the legal resource Library for the whole Department but the staff are forced to rely on a few legal CD-ROMs only, which will soon be redundant. In order to access the internet the staff have to travel to the main staff library in another suburb. It is hoped that there will soon be an office outside the inmate area centre available for their use.

In general the libraries in most centres have been under-utilised, under-resourced and generally ignored by the prison management and staff. They are often dumping grounds for difficult inmates who nobody else wants to work with. Any new or good quality resources disappear very quickly unless they are locked up in a separate area. These losses have the potential to be a continual drain on the department's funds, unless corrective action is taken.

Libraries into the Future

A review was undertaken by the Manager, Library Services in 2004 and this resulted in a number of recommendations being made to improve the situation in the correctional centre libraries. These 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 lack of space in the centres and funding. 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.

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 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 per 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 a good one.

However, even with adequate resources, libraries cannot function properly without trained library staff. They 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! Running a library is a skilled position that is remunerated quite well outside the correctional centres. Staffing all of the

inmate libraries with professional library staff would be the preferred model to remedy this situation, of course, but because of the expense this is unlikely to happen any time soon.

Inmate library staff have been given little or no training and often do the job for a very short period of time. 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 and 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 would be 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 would ensure a better managed library which would benefit the other inmates and it would assist in fulfilling the Department's aim to rehabilitate offenders to hopefully reduce re-offending. The appropriate qualification would be a Certificate III or Diploma in Library and Information Studies, which will enable successful candidates to obtain employment as a Library Assistant or Library Technician when they are no longer in the Department's care. Those who are incarcerated for a longer time may also pursue a Librarian degree through recognised distance education courses.

The inmate staff must also be allowed to remain in the job for a reasonable amount of time (i.e. preferably at least 12 months) and work holds could be arranged to ensure this, when necessary. The amount they are paid must also be enough to compete with CSI wages for other industries, as otherwise the libraries lose potentially good inmate library staff because of the pay differentials. The pay scales should be linked to the training option, in order to make the job and the training a more attractive alternative. There should also, where possible, be a succession plan in place to ensure that the library is staffed continuously, with new staff being 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 the 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 others 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 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. It was particularly surprising that the Library teaching staff 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 in Sydney either use interstate colleges such as at Box Hill or a commercial Registered Training Organizations like Docmatrix. A number of quotes were obtained and Workplace Australia Group was selected as the preferred Registered Training Organizations, on the basis of cost and most interest in, and understanding of, the requirements of this project.

The pilot for the course was conducted in 2005 with 4 Inmate Library Clerks in 4 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 downloaded by the Manager, Library Service and saved onto CDs which were sent to the students as required.

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. Many 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 course materials and telephone tutoring to the students as required. They also conducted assessment activities, according to the requirements of the course. This often required some creativity in conducting the assessments

One 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 software and have it put onto a CD that we could distribute at will. 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, Informat, Ebsco, Ovid and Libraries Australia (the National Library catalogue).

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:

- 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 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.
- Frustration with the departmental directive about inmate use of computers which has restricted the use of computers in the libraries and in some cases made it impossible to maintain a circulation system..

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

- Enthusiasm in 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.

- Thrill of seeing a “real” library begin to take shape, when there was nothing (or very little) there before

Conclusion

The inmate libraries in NSW correctional centres are currently undergoing a change in management, resources and facilities that will result in a much improved situation for the inmates incarcerated in these centres. An important part of these changes involve the training of the Inmate Library Clerks who have the day to day responsibility for managing the libraries. 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.

Appendix 1: 2005 Inmate Library survey results (abridged)

The results detailed below are a selection from the replies of a survey sent to all correctional centres in Australia (except those managed by the NSW Department of Corrective Services) in July 2005. The survey was conducted by the Manager, Library Services for the NSW department, with the intention of determining the state of inmate library services in other jurisdictions. The figures below therefore do not include details from the NSW correctional centres, except for Junee, which is managed by a private company. Replies are as received by 31st July 2005, although more have since been received.

STATE	Freq	Percent
NSW	1	2.8%
NT	1	2.8%
Qld	5	13.9%
SA	5	13.9%
Tas	3	8.3%
Vic	8	22.2%
WA	13	36.1%
Total	36	100.0%

Is there a library in your centre?

	Freq	Percent
No	0	0.0%
Yes	36	100.0%
Total	36	100.0%

Manager of the Library

	Freq	Percent
Administrative personnel	2	5.6%
Correctional Education Officer	3	8.3%
Correctional Officer	7	19.4%
Community Corrections Officer	1	2.8%
TAFE Manager	1	2.8%
Inmate	3	8.3%
Librarian	2	5.6%
Manager Offender Services	1	2.8%
Programs manager	2	5.6%
Recreation officer	3	8.3%
Senior Correctional Education Officer	8	22.2%
Volunteer Unit	3	8.3%
Total	36	100.0%

Manager Qualifications? Y/N

	Freq	Percent
Yes	1	2.8%
No	35	97.2%
Total	36	100.0%

Manager - Type of Qualifications

	Freq	Percent
B Ed with school library exp	1	33.3%
Diploma (Library Technician)	1	33.3%
LISWA course (1 week)	1	33.3%
Total	3	100.0%

Inmate working in the Library?

	Freq	Percent
Yes	32	88.9%
No	4	11.1%
Total	36	100.0%

Inmate qualifications? Yes/No

	Freq	Percent	Cum.
Yes	1	2.8%	2.8%
No	35	97.2%	100.0%
Total	36	100.0%	

Type of Inmate Library Clerk qualifications

	Freq	Percent	Cum.
Cert II	1	100.0%	100.0%
Total	1	100.0%	

Is there a library budget?

	Freq	Percent
No	17	47.2%
Yes	19	52.8%
Total	36	100.0%