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## **‘Working together’: Public libraries supporting rural, regional, and remote low-socioeconomic student success in partnership with universities**

University students living in rural, regional, and remote (RRR) areas of Australia face unique challenges including geographical isolation, lack of access to face-to-face support, and technological barriers. Additionally, RRR students from low-socioeconomic (low-SES) backgrounds experience multiple forms of disadvantage compared to their on-campus peers, and require additional study, learning, and social support. Partnerships between universities and local public libraries can enhance RRR low-SES student success through increased access to face-to-face support, reliable technologies, and study facilities. This exploratory research, led by five regional universities, presents the first national-level empirical data exploring how Australian public libraries and universities can work together to facilitate success for RRR low-SES students. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with public librarians from RRR low-SES communities across Australia. Thematic analysis findings explore themes of librarians’ perceptions of students as persons; the role of regional librarians in supporting RRR low-SES students; RRR low-SES students’ access to learning support; and the critical elements of sustainable partnerships between RRR public libraries and universities. Key recommendations are provided to guide future partnerships between public libraries and universities, including building the foundations of partnerships; professional development to support partnerships; and recommendations for good partnership practices.

Keywords: Universities; public libraries; student success; rural regional and remote communities; partnership; study and learning support.

## **Introduction**

University students from low-socioeconomic (low-SES) backgrounds living in rural, regional, and remote (RRR) Australian communities experience multiple disadvantages compared to their on-campus peers, impacting RRR low-SES student success. In higher education, ‘student success’ is traditionally defined as student engagement, academic achievements, retention rates, and completion rates (Tinto, 1993; York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). These measures contribute to a deficit narrative around student success, and do not consider student experiences and behaviours (Picton, Kahu, & Nelson, 2018; Wood & Breyer, 2017).

Recently, holistic conceptualisations of student success have emerged. They include the following factors: feelings of belonging with peers, courses, and university (Naylor, 2017; Picton et al., 2018); a sense of positive psychological wellbeing and community (Schreiner, 2010); and ‘academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post college performance’ (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006, p. 7). This study merges the traditional and the holistic definitions into a nuanced understanding of RRR low-SES student success.

### ***Rural, Regional, and Remote Low-Socioeconomic Student Support***

In 2008, the Bradley ‘Review of Australian Higher Education’ called for increased higher education access and participation from students with low-SES backgrounds and those living in RRR communities, as unequal access had contributed to underrepresented participation for these groups (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Following the ‘Bradley Review’ in 2008 little has changed in the participation rates of RRR and low-SES students (DEEWR (2008) as cited in Bradley et al., 2008; Department of Education and Training, 2017b).

Furthermore, both RRR and low-SES students exhibit low completion rates, and require additional support in order to meet the Bradley Review targets for retention and completion (Bradley et al., 2008; Department of Education and Training, 2017a).

Inequality also exists in the support provided to students in RRR areas. These students report lower levels of support compared to their on-campus peers, leading to higher levels of overall dissatisfaction and departure intentions (Radloff & Coates, 2010). Furthermore, RRR students studying online feel like ‘second-class citizens’ (O’Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015, p. 55) compared to their on-campus peers. They lack access to reliable internet and technology; face-to-face support; and networking and connections with their peers and lecturers (Bailey, Ifenthaler, Gosper, Kretzschmar, & Ware, 2015; Lowrie & Jorgensen, 2012; Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011; Waha & Davis, 2014). These factors can lead to feelings of isolation and poor learning experiences, contributing to lower retention rates for RRR students (Parkes, Gregory, Fletcher, Adlington, & Gromik, 2015).

RRR low-SES students experience a heightened level of the detrimental effects of poverty on their participation and retention, requiring sustainable outreach and support initiatives from universities (Bradley et al., 2008). Providing comprehensive support for RRR low-SES students will increase student academic achievement while reducing rates of departure intentions and dissatisfaction (Radloff & Coates, 2010). One approach to achieve this is through ‘institutional cross-collaboration and partnerships, including sharing the use of facilities and resources’ with local community organisations (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 111).

Communities will also benefit from university partnerships with local organisations. Rural residents perceive increasing a university’s presence in their community is highly important. Perceived benefits include increased retention of young people in RRR communities due to increased equity of access to higher education, leading to greater family and community support networks for those who choose to stay and study locally

(Drummond, Halsey, & van Breda, 2011). Family support is also an essential factor in regional low-SES student success (Devlin & McKay, 2017).

### ***Regional Public Libraries***

Public libraries in RRR low-SES Australian communities are well-positioned to provide local university students with essential face-to-face study support, facilities, and technologies.

Many RRR communities around Australia have a public library, with over 1400 public library branches spread Australia-wide (NSLA, 2017). The mission of public libraries is to provide universal access to support, services, and resources for all groups and individuals in their community. This also includes lifelong learning and study enabling facilities, aligning with the support needs of RRR low-SES students (Koontz & Gubbin, 2010). Public libraries are safe spaces trusted by community members to receive information support and resources in response to their needs (Oliphant, 2014).

Public libraries and universities working in partnership could encourage students to use their local library, which has a positive correlation with student achievement (Brown & Malenfant, 2016). Additionally, an increase in student retention rates can be achieved through the use of libraries and the support of librarians, assisting students to gain lifelong learning skills alongside digital and information literacies (Becker, 2006; Haddow & Joseph, 2010; Hagel, Horn, Owen, & Currie, 2012; Pendell, Withers, Castek, & Reder, 2013).

### ***Public Libraries and Universities Working Together to Support Students***

Universities working together in partnership with public libraries provide opportunities for delivering multifaceted support to low-SES university students in RRR communities across Australia. In an international context, Behr and LaDell-Thomas's (2014) study found distance education students ranked the closeness of a public library location as an important factor in

their use of the library for study and learning needs. These students were self-directed learners, with less than half seeking research support from public library staff, and 42% utilising their local public library alongside their university's online library. They concluded that partnerships between public libraries and universities could improve distance education students' study and learning experiences (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014). Potential partnerships identified include increased promotion of academic and public libraries' services, peer networking opportunities, academic writing and research skill sessions, and exam supervision (Dority (2000) as cited in Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014).

In the Australian literature, only two studies provide empirical evidence exploring how Australian public libraries in partnership with universities support current RRR students in their community. The first explored Open Universities Australia's partnership with four regional community public libraries in New South Wales. Library information sessions hosted by public libraries raised local student awareness of their study support and facilities such as internet and computer access, journal databases, inter-library loan services, and face-to-face support from library staff (Hill & McGowan, 2014a). Students reported attending sessions to seek study support and connection with peers in their community, with 85% (N=20) reporting increased confidence studying online post-sessions (Hill & McGowan, 2014b). The partnership benefited both the participating public libraries and students, as it allowed students to 'make use of public library services and resources within their local communities and, in doing so, to feel connected and supported with others who understand their needs' (Hill & McGowan, 2014a, p. 1).

The second study by Howlett, Partridge, and Belov (2017) was the first in Australia to explore how regional public libraries in Queensland currently support university students in their communities. Their qualitative analysis led to multiple findings. Firstly, public librarians do not have full knowledge of students' specific learning support needs, and the

support they can or could provide students. This is due to a lack of information sharing and communication with universities, and limited evidence gathering by libraries, leading to unmet student learning support expectations. Howlett et al. (2017) also identified a tension between participants saying that academic libraries are responsible for students' study and learning needs and support, but then describing public libraries as providers of access and support for all learning in their community. They also outlined the mission of public libraries to balance the needs of different user groups across the community, and to supply more general materials rather than resources for small and specific groups. Public librarians perceived libraries as a 'host' for university students to access study and learning support. Due to limited academic resources, 'hosting' was seen as student use of library facilities including study spaces and technology. Librarians also provided a first point of contact and assistance in finding and referring students towards materials, services, and support (Howlett et al., 2017).

Howlett et al. (2017) highlighted that further research is needed to fill gaps in the empirical literature in this area. This includes involving multiple institutions to examine implementing partnerships between public libraries and universities to support students in RRR communities nation-wide, to expand the geographic scope and applicability of findings. Additionally, all three studies did not explicitly explore study and learning support provided by public libraries and universities for both RRR located and low-SES students (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014; Hill & McGowan, 2014b; Howlett et al., 2017).

To address this gap in the literature, the 'Working Together' project conducted exploratory research to investigate how public libraries and universities across Australia can work together to support RRR low-SES student success. The Howlett et al. (2017) findings and recommendations shaped the initial thinking leading to the 'Working Together' project. Five regional Australian universities, all with significant RRR low-SES student enrolments,

partnered together to lead the project. It sought perspectives from 19 public librarians and 42 university students living in 17 RRR low-SES communities, alongside 30 university staff working to support students across the five partnering institutions.

This paper explores the ‘Working Together’ project’s findings derived from qualitative analysis of 19 semi-structured interviews with public librarians in RRR low-SES communities with university student enrolments. It presents the first national-level empirical data on how public libraries support RRR low-SES students, and how public libraries working together with universities provides opportunities to enhance RRR low-SES student success.

## **The Research Project**

### ***Research Aim***

This research project sought to investigate the following research question: ‘how can Australian universities and public libraries work together to provide highly accessible, relevant, and sustainable learning support to meet the needs of low socio-economic higher education students living in regional and remote communities?’ (Working Together, 2018). Specifically, it aimed to explore through an interpretivist lens how RRR low-SES university students’ study and learning needs are currently supported by public libraries, including any issues or challenges faced, and how universities can work together with public libraries in partnership to support students further. Importantly, the study was not restricted to partnerships between academic libraries and public libraries only, as the entire suite of university student support in partnership with public libraries is needed to provide holistic support to RRR low-SES students.



### *Conceptualizing Student Success*

For this research project, student success was defined as the combination of both the traditional and holistic understandings of student success:

- Students experiencing positive psychological wellbeing, community (Schreiner, 2010), and belonging within their peers, courses, and university (Naylor, 2017; Picton et al., 2018);
- Students engaging in satisfying and purposeful educational activities, leading to skill and knowledge acquisition producing academic achievement (Kuh et al., 2006);
- Engagement, achievement, and belonging combining to allow students to persist towards attaining their desired educational outcomes, leading to increased retention and completion rates (Tinto, 1993; York et al., 2015).

### *Selecting the Regional and Remote Communities*

Five regional universities with significant RRR low-SES student enrolments partnered together for this study. Each created a shortlist of eight or more RRR communities across Australia using student enrolment data from their institution. Using the following set of selection criteria, these 40+ communities were narrowed down to four per university, 20 in total. Communities were selected to represent a diverse set of remoteness, socio-economic disadvantage, and contextual attributes:

- Communities were firstly selected to represent a range of remoteness levels using the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) including inner regional, outer regional, remote, and very remote communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

- Communities were shortlisted if their Socio Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) score placed their postcode in the lowest 10% to 50% of relative socio-economic advantage, in comparison to all postcodes across Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).
- Other contextual factors applied as selection criteria were: (a) community proximity to the nearest public library is under one hour's drive; (b) population is between 200 and 30,000 people; and (c) inclusion of a range of regional areas across the Australian states and territories.

Public library staff from the 20 selected communities were invited to participate. Due to slow participation uptake an additional nine communities were added to the recruitment list and subsequently invited to participate to address the shortfall in participation. These communities were sourced from the rejected shortlisted communities, using a 'best fit' approach with the selection criteria.

### ***Data Collection***

From these 29 locations, staff members at each community's local public library were invited to participate. Contact details were retrieved via the associated state libraries and local library websites. Data was collected through recorded Skype and telephone semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview format used allowed deeper investigation into the experiences of library staff. The interview protocol was designed and utilised to elicit the public library participants' experiences and perceptions of: (a) university student study and learning needs; (b) supporting students' needs, including resources and services provided; (c) any issues or challenges faced; and (d) how public libraries can work together with universities to support local RRR low-SES students.

## ***Participants***

When data collection was finalised, a total of 19 participants from 17 RRR low-SES communities were interviewed. 18 participants were female, and one was male. Participants were most often employed at the level of library manager (or equivalent), and reported having insight into strategic planning, resourcing, operations, budgets, partnerships, and front-facing customer service experience.

The 17 communities where the 19 participants were employed as a library staff member were finalised as the community sites for recruitment of university students for the project. The participating communities were most commonly located in inner and outer regional ASGS areas; with only one remote community and one very remote community (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Most communities were located in New South Wales and Queensland. Other states represented include Western Australia, Tasmania, and Victoria. The majority of these communities were situated in areas of the lowest 10-20% socio-economic advantage according to the SEIFA score of their postcode, and with populations of under 10,000 residents as of 2017 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

## ***Data Analysis***

The 19 interviews yielded approximately 15.5 hours of recorded audio, which was transcribed into 367 pages of text. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis methodology was used to guide data analysis. Thematic data analysis organises and codes transcription data into the rich detail of the specific phenomenon present, including experiences, emotions, and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis identified four themes of participant experience, further elaborated in the findings section. All participant quotes are de-identified, using only participant numbers (e.g. P1 for Participant 1).

## Findings

The thematic analysis identified four themes of participant experience:

- *Student as person*: detailing their understanding of the life experiences and responsibilities local students are managing alongside their studies.
- *Role*: describing their mission within the community, and their understanding of how their role supports current and future local students.
- *Access*: encompassing local RRR low-SES students' access to support, facilities, and study resources through their public library, including current needs and gaps.
- *Partnerships*: exploring key practices for implementing successful partnerships between public libraries and universities.

These themes all build upon each other. For example, the *student as person* theme highlights a lack of participants' knowledge of students' study and learning support needs through empirical data and training. This is related to participants' *role* theme, as librarians don't see themselves as experts in the provision of face-to-face student support due to their limited knowledge of students' needs, and instead see their role as referral-based, directing students towards information and services. From the interaction of the two previous themes, the *access* theme identifies participants' perception that library facilities such as study spaces and technology are the main form of local students' access to support, rather than through face-to-face support. The *partnerships* theme explores how public libraries and universities working together can fill gaps in public librarians' understanding of student needs, and the face-to-face support they could further provide to local students. The themes will now be discussed in full.

### *Student as Person*

Participants held perceptions surrounding the lived experiences of students studying within their community. They focus on students as a whole person, including their understanding of students' backgrounds, contexts, experiences, and support needs.

Librarians observed that university students in their community come from a range of diverse backgrounds, with the majority studying externally online. The most common group observed were described as 'mature-aged people that also have jobs that try and fit in... their studies in with their work and family' (P5). Participants observed local students are 'people who are obviously studying from here because they want to stay in town and they want to contribute to the community by bettering themselves' (P16). Students were perceived by librarians as being high in self-efficacy, especially in organising their studies and resources: 'because we're so isolated, most of them [students] are pretty good ... pretty organised. You have to be when you live so far away from anywhere' (P14).

Librarians have empathy for students studying online in their community, as 'a lot of us have done Distance Ed study and we understand' (P3). Due to this, they build relationships with the students in their community as a way of informal study support. Librarians encourage students and 'keep them motivated, you know, check in on them' (P3), which they see as beneficial for students 'socially and probably for their mental health after all the study, they probably like that chat' (P16). The benefit of this ongoing support over months and years is 'we see where their journey starts and we often, through relationships, know where they want to go to' (P7). Participants have observed this informal method of study support can improve retention for students studying online:

...they have said to us, that's been the difference between giving up and continuing in their studies, because there's a physical presence, there's a person they can talk to even if

it's only five minutes... even if we don't explicitly help them, just having someone to say "I'm doing this assignment", you know, it makes a difference to them. (P7)

Participants also perceived the transition towards studying at university as intimidating for some individuals in their community. Their perception related to the confidence of these potential students in particular, 'it's that fear of going and appearing stupid that puts a lot of people off' (P11). They also empathised with people on a pathway to university who may be the first in their family to do so, 'if you're coming from a family where you are the first one to embark on university, I think everything that surrounds that must be so intimidating' (P11). In order to support these community members, librarians see this as an opportunity to position the library as a welcoming space:

...using a public library is a good practice run for a university library as well, which can be quite different to a public library. But if you go from nothing to university library, that's a massive step... we're kind of like that grassroots entry-level learning, and confidence-building. (P7)

Despite these insights into local university students' contexts and experiences, most participants do not collect data on the demographics and patronage of students to their library, as they 'haven't needed to in the past' (P2). This is partly due to the difficulty many participants expressed in being able to identify patrons as university students 'unless they come up and talk to staff about it and ask questions' (P4). While some librarians 'usually know [which patrons are university students] because it's a smallish town' (P2), a lack of data collection means participants were not able to accurately estimate the number of university students in their community or using their library. Due to this, formalised study and learning support for university students in particular were not provided by participants' libraries, as empirical data demonstrating need is commonly required by funding bodies to be successful in funding and implementing support and resources. Additionally, due to the lack

of empirical data regional libraries have on the students in their communities, some participants expressed uncertainty regarding their understanding of what support these students need: ‘the only challenge that we face is trying to understand exactly what it is that they need’ (P13). They highlighted student feedback as critical, as ‘we need them to be telling us what we can do to support them’ (P6).

### ***Role***

Participants identified their role within the community aligns with their mission to provide resources, facilities, and support to ‘try and spread our resources over the whole community’ (P2). This mission is also necessary due to the impact of limited funding upon public libraries. Participants expressed anxiety around the limited funding they receive, often from a combination of sources including their state library, local council, and state and federal government.

While librarians are ‘multi-skilled, multi-focused’ (P6) professionals, they commonly didn’t see themselves as experts or adequately trained in supporting university students’ specific academic study and learning needs, saying ‘our staff has expertise, but that’s in the field of library’ (P6). Specific academic study and learning support was not reportedly offered by most library staff, as ‘the skills to be able to help them [students] with assignments, with essays... the tutor education skills – that’s not a traditional library skill set’ (P3).

Instead, librarians saw their role in supporting students as providing accurate face-to-face information referrals to ‘point people in the right direction’ (P2). However, most librarians reported limited or no awareness of the range of study and learning support services universities offer their online students, thus limiting their ability to refer students towards accessing university support services. The majority of their knowledge of these

services was drawn from participants' own university study experiences. Librarians identified universities could provide more information, beyond basic informational posters, to allow libraries to add this into 'training and in our knowledge-base system for our staff' (P16).

Compared to the support offered to rural students, librarians appeared more confident in their support offered to community members on a pathway towards enrolling in university:

...if we had a student that we knew was looking into becoming a university student, particularly as a distance student, then we would see it as a part of our responsibility to help them find and understand all the information around what that entails, what that's going to mean for them and how to navigate their way through. (P7)

Librarians, through their support of life-long learning, assist in building community members' learning identity and teach foundational skills critical for learning, such as 'time management, negotiating skills, applying knowledge' (P7). As discussed earlier, participants perceive many community members find universities intimidating, so they position public libraries as 'a place that is accepting and non-judgemental and that is available for them' (P7) to build confidence and practise these skills.

Librarians also provide information through referrals to community members looking for more information on pathways to university study. This includes university and study information and support websites including where individuals can enrol online, and 'making them aware of what is available through the university system and what they can do to extend themselves' (P5).

### *Access*

Public librarians and libraries provide RRR low-SES students with access to limited face-to-face study and learning support, and to critical technology and study facilities. Access was consistently discussed by participants in relation to their library's mission of providing



whole-of-community support, including the potential benefits for the wider community through equal access to the same support. Additionally, participants were concerned with the number of local university students needed to make expansion of support and resources worthwhile for libraries to invest in, due to limited library budgets and funding. Significant numbers of university students studying locally was perceived by librarians as a strong rationale for expansion of funding, support, and services.

The main face-to-face learning support students currently request from librarians is 'technology help rather than actual reference questions' (P8), often from students who are mature-aged and 'going back to study, not sure how to use the computer' (P9). This computer literacy support is provided through one-on-one ad-hoc support, or through formalised computer literacy programs run regularly at the library for any community member to attend.

Exam supervision was another source of face-to-face student support, usually provided for free by many libraries, that librarians felt often goes unrecognised by universities. This was a source of frustration for librarians as supervising exams:

...has a cost to it, because that means often the staff are limited to what kinds of tasks they can carry out while they're there, because if they're not allowed to leave the student unmonitored. (P6)

The service is continued in some libraries however, as they recognise the benefits to students who don't have to travel to campus to undertake exams.

The predominant way librarians perceived they currently support university students is through providing access to two essential study facilities: technology and study space. Participants provided students access to technology, including wireless internet, power points, computers, printers, and scanners. Participants observed most students would bring their own laptops to connect to the library Wi-Fi and sit at a 'desk that you can plug in power and use your own device at the library' (P13). As internet access is costly, unreliable, or

unavailable in many RRR low-SES areas of Australia, free Wi-Fi internet access is seen as ‘a really vital service for this community because it’s a fairly low socio-economic area’ (P12).

Library public access computers were also cited as a source of support for some students who don’t have access to a computer at home. Other digital resources commonly used by students were the library’s paid printers and scanners to print syllabus, resources, and assignments.

Only a minority of libraries have video-conferencing capabilities, which was seen by participants as a key area to improve access for students.

Students also access their library’s quiet study spaces, including meeting rooms, desks and study carrels with power points. However, librarians in small libraries found it challenging to provide this space, as ‘there’s not a lot of room, we’re not a huge library’ (P14). Additionally, librarians observed noise from other patrons utilising the library can be a source of disruption for students attempting to study:

...libraries aren’t going to be quiet, they’re not the quiet space that they used to be, and we’re always trying to meet the needs of everybody in the public libraries. And without being able to provide that traditional quiet space for students ... they find it very difficult to do what they need to do. They compete in priorities. (P13)

A common source of frustration for library staff is students’ common misconception that they can expect to access their textbooks from their local public library. All public librarians were adamant that their libraries don’t have the budget to buy textbooks, relating to their mission to support the majority of community members, as they ‘can buy three or four adult fictions, for the cost of the cheapest textbook’ (P16). Librarians found accessing students’ textbooks through inter-library loans was often unsuccessful. Even if a textbook is available for inter-library loan, high loan fees left students:

...feeling penalised if they have to access it somewhere else. And especially in rural and remote areas, if you do not have transport and you’re relying on dodgy internet

connections and you've got a public library where they say to you, "I'm sorry, this book is going to cost you \$18 to get in". (P11)

This was a barrier for local students needing access to a textbook via inter-library loan, as the 'cost is a big... a real barrier' (P14) and 'prohibitive for a student' (P11).

While most librarians did not see their physical library collection as being particularly helpful for students' study and learning, many thought their access to subscribed journals and databases was a useful source of support. However libraries' ability to subscribe to scholarly journals is currently on the decline due to their limited budgets. Despite this, librarians identified:

...our best skill would be actually help them [students] search databases, 'cause clearly the university provides them with more in-depth databases than we can as a public library. But we have got the skills to assist them to use them more efficiently. (P8)

### ***Partnerships***

Participants had a range of experiences and recommendations regarding how partnerships are implemented due to current and past partnership experiences and knowledge of public library operations. Foundational elements of partnership included openness, initiation, communication, implementation, sustainability, roles, and goals.

Most librarians indicated they are open to working together and partnering with universities to support students and expected the majority of other RRR public libraries would also be open to partnership opportunities. Before partnerships can be implemented, communication and relationships between public libraries and universities were identified by participants as needing improvement. Participants feel current dialogue with universities is low or non-existent due to disconnection and 'silos'. They recognised establishing relationships with universities and individuals can assist in opening dialogue to discuss possibilities of working together to support the RRR low-SES students in their communities.

This would help librarians in their ability to provide referral support for students through ‘someone that we can contact, and then they can always point us in the right direction’ (P17).

Librarians saw the next step as opening a dialogue between institutions regarding the needs of students in the area. Librarians preferred that universities take the lead role when initiating partnerships by ‘providing the library with information on what they can do to assist university students’ (P18). Due to a lack of data on students in their community, librarians requested information on ‘how many university students are in our area studying either online or by distance’ (P16). Data on student numbers and needs would allow libraries to commit or secure more funding and resources to supporting students if there are significant numbers in the community. Furthermore, due to the funding models of some public libraries their local councils, library corporations, and state library organisations could also play a role in approving partnerships. Participants also saw a role for state libraries to raise awareness of partnerships and encourage public libraries to work together with universities to support RRR low-SES students.

Partnerships must also be built on a foundation of mutual benefit, understanding, respect, and equality between public libraries and universities in order to be successful. It is important to public librarians ‘to be seen as equal partners’ (P7) throughout the process.

Equal partnership is crucial for success, because:

...if we’re all about developing and supporting the client to reach their learning goals, it has to be an equal partnership, it can’t be the university coming in and telling us what we have to do to support them – which is sometimes how it feels – with no acknowledgement, or very little acknowledgement, that we have a different mission. (P7)

Librarians stressed it was crucial that universities understand their mission and role within the community, in order to have an open dialogue for the possibilities of working together:

It's about showing that champion for libraries within the university who has an understanding of the ethos of public libraries, to make those connections. And to see the opportunities, when conversations take place, to say, "Well, have you thought about talking to the public library about doing that?" (P6)

Mutually beneficial partnerships are also crucial for the longevity of these projects, as 'there has to be mutual benefit because if it's one sided, it's generally not very sustainable' (P6). Working together with universities to support students is seen as mutually beneficial for public libraries, as:

...there's benefits for us because if there's 20 extra students join the library as a result of this... that's time well spent. And if they're accessing our resources, then that's increasing our usage, which all supports why library services exist. (P6)

Equality of access and support for all community members is critical for public librarians, who also stipulated that all university students in their community should be supported in partnerships, not only the partnering university's students.

Additionally, mutual respect must be established to ensure a successful partnership experience: 'you've got to meet on a level playing field with a bit of mutual respect... you work in a different field and you might be deficient in these resources, but you're actually very capable and you know what you're doing' (P11).

Public librarians discussed the importance of communication with universities regarding the needs of students, and how this relates to realistic goals of partnership. Openness and clarity surrounding partnership goals is also vital, with participants calling for a:

...clear memorandum of understanding of what each service provider are going to supply and how it's going to work; understanding of the implications on space and service delivery expectations from staff; and a clear budget as well. (P1)

This may allay concerns librarians expressed surrounding universities shifting their responsibilities and costs onto public libraries:

The thing I am a bit wary about is cost shifting, in terms of what am I expected to pick up that the university already does, but that may be passed on to the library... And also if there's a big contingency of students, how will we be supported in technology or hardware or resources to support that? (P1)

While partnerships are being implemented, frank communication between all parties should continue, with stakeholders needing to 'regularly review that [partnership]. You know, things change all the time, you can't just expect something to be working for the next two or three years. It has to be reviewed and it has to be done collaboratively' (P7).

Sustainability of partnerships was a concern of many librarians, who highlighted the importance of gaining sustainable funding; creating realistic time commitments and milestones; and ensuring the longevity of the partnership and its funding. Participants hold this view because 'you're not going to see any change until you've worked at something for 10 to 15 years' (P11). A protective factor for public libraries and universities is their established history in the Australian context:

...you're actually looking at two institutions that have actually got longevity and that works in its favour. It is not an agency that was constructed five years ago and has got maybe a 10-year shelf life. You've got two institutions that have form. I think that is a big advantage. (P11)

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

The findings from the four themes will now be explored and related back to existing literature to provide recommendations for future best practice in partnerships. The following recommendations address the need to build partnership foundations, essential professional development for public library and university staff, best practice for partnership

implementation, and avenues for future research.

### ***Current Student Support***

It is important to acknowledge the support public libraries in RRR communities currently provide their local students. The most significant source of support is providing students with internet access. This has been identified in the literature as a significant equity issue for both low-SES students and those living in RRR communities (Devlin & McKay, 2017; Nelson et al., 2017). Devlin and McKay (2017) found internet access provided through public libraries is a critical factor in student success, enabling them to access and download study materials, and participate in lectures, assessment, and online discussion forums.

Additionally, public libraries enable students' access to study space and technology such as public access computers, printers, and scanners. Students can engage in online learning activities and assessment at their local public library if they do not have adequate access to these technologies or space at home. These findings are supported by Howlett et al. who also found public libraries were a 'host' to facilities and technology supporting students' access to study and learning materials and supports (2017). This is significant as Devlin and McKay (2017) also identified reliable technology as another factor in regional and low-SES student success.

Other face-to-face support provided by public libraries includes empathic conversation and interest in students' learning journey, with librarians perceiving their face-to-face support assisted in local student retention. Behr & LaDell-Thomas identified these face-to-face interactions with librarians are significant for RRR students who might otherwise miss out on this type of support (2014), with empathic support identified another factor in regional and low-SES student success (Devlin & McKay, 2017).

Another face-to-face support provided by public libraries is exam supervision, which allows students to participate in exam assessment from their local community (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014; Howlett et al., 2017). This service is perceived to be unrecognised by universities, yet it supports many RRR low-SES students who may not have the financial resources to travel to university campuses to sit exams. While providing access to journal articles and public library research assistance support is not widely practiced among participating libraries, literature supports the findings that most students are self-directed in their use of public libraries, with less of a need for face-to-face study support in this area (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014).

Furthermore, public librarians position their local public library as a safe accessible space for community members on the pathway to university and throughout their higher education journey. Their support in building learning identity, time management skills, and computer literacies enacts a key recommendation from Halsey's Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education to 'support RRR students to make successful transitions from school to university' (2018, p. 5).

### ***Building the Foundations of Partnership***

Foundational changes are needed to improve the environment for partnership and RRR low-SES student support and success.

By promoting the services, facilities, resources, and support that RRR low-SES students can access at their local public libraries, universities can increase student awareness and usage of their local public library (Behr & LaDell-Thomas, 2014). This is beneficial for student success, as literature suggests increased student library usage is related to higher academic achievement and retention (Brown & Malenfant, 2016; Haddow & Joseph, 2010).



Furthermore, universities can support both the experience of RRR low-SES students and the public libraries supporting them through opening access to study resources through increased institutional adoption of Open Textbooks and Open Educational Resources. This would ensure low-SES students in RRR communities can download their textbooks or resources anywhere they have internet access, such as their local library. This could remove the significant financial burden on RRR low-SES students from buying multiple textbooks or paying multiple inter-library loan fees (Bossu, Bull, & Brown, 2012). Additionally, universities could support and promote university academic libraries' services that increase student access to study resources. These services include access to online collection e-texts, return postage of physical collection books, scanning and sending students' excerpts of books, online skills development modules, and online assistance and inquiry services.

To lay the foundations for partnerships, universities should identify RRR communities with local enrolled students with study needs and a public library located in their vicinity. Data on local student study support needs is crucial information for public libraries to receive before partnerships can begin. This will ensure libraries are delivering according to needs of the students in the community, as they currently have little data to provide them with insight into student needs. Public libraries' lack of student needs data was also identified in the Howlett et al. study, which also recommended universities should increase communication and information sharing of student study support needs with public libraries, including: the number of students in their community, the technology needed by students, and the existing support services provided to students by their universities (2017).

### ***Professional Development to Support Partnership***

Training for both university staff and RRR public library staff is recommended to increase understanding of the missions and support abilities of both institutions, and for public library

staff to provide appropriate support and referral to university support services and information. Professional development is required to increase university staff understanding of the mission of public libraries and the resources, facilities, and support they can (and currently) provide students. As found by both this study and Howlett et al. (2017), public libraries cannot commit unlimited resources to student support, as their mission is to provide a balanced provision of services to support needs across the community.

Professional learning for public library staff could increase their understanding of RRR low-SES students and their local study and learning needs, and the ways public libraries can support these needs (Devlin & McKay, 2017; Howlett et al., 2017). This professional learning can provide a solid foundation towards the development of ongoing partnerships.

Further training can expand the support RRR public librarians already provide to local students through advice and referrals to information and support, also identified in the Howlett et al. study (2017). Firstly, professional development could increase staff understanding of what online and distance university education currently involves, and the range of study and learning support services available to students from their university, as also recommended by Howlett et al. (2017). Secondly, professional development and resources are needed to increase public library staff understanding of the many pathways for community members to apply to study at universities online. This may assist in supporting community members who find university systems and pathways intimidating, as reported by participants.

### ***Recommendations for Partnership Practice***

This study addresses the gap in literature identified by Howlett et al. (2017), through providing concrete findings and recommendations for public libraries and universities to work together in partnership to support RRR low-SES students. Recommendations for

partnership encompass partnership communication, roles, goals, access, and sustainability.

Communication is important throughout the partnership process. Public libraries are calling for formal channels of communication and relationships to be established with universities, as also found in Howlett et al. (2017). To make partnerships a sustainable proposition in the long term, engagement and action from these recommendations can develop through communication between key stakeholders from universities, public libraries, professional organisations, and state governments. This would ensure communication and relationships are maintained over the long term at senior levels across Australian public libraries and universities.

Additionally, in the initial stages of partnership universities need to provide public libraries with data on student numbers in their community and information on student learning needs and support, as also found by Howlett et al. (2017). Communication should also include the mission statements of both institutions, with public libraries stipulating the importance of support for all university students living in their community rather than only for partnering institutions' students, aligning with their mission as discussed by Koontz and Gubbin (2010).

Another important step towards partnership is clearly outlining the roles of each stakeholder and the shared goals of working together. Each stakeholder should be treated as an equal partner, with mutual respect and understanding of each other's missions. Other stakeholders, including local councils, funding bodies, and community organisations, should also be considered and included in communication. Clear boundaries in the roles of both university and public libraries are important, as cost and responsibility shifting is a concern of public library staff.

Goals of the partnership in the short and long term need to be established and regularly revisited to measure progress throughout the partnership process. Goals should be

mutually beneficial to the missions of public libraries and universities, with the shared focus on the provision of support to RRR low-SES students. It is essential to ensure the responsibilities of each stakeholder in pursuit of goals are achievable and sustainable in the long-term. This can be enacted through public libraries and universities working together to develop strategies to ensure sustainable access and resource sharing, through changing business models to redirect silos of support practices and to streamline RRR low-SES students' access to support. Sustainable partnerships can be achieved with realistic goals and regular open communication between stakeholders. Additionally, partnerships should ensure adequate funding for the long term (at least five to ten years) is secured to have real impact for low-SES students in RRR communities.

National and state-level professional bodies representing multiple institutions and libraries are best positioned to identify partnership opportunities from these recommendations to support the needs of RRR low-SES students. These include Universities Australia, Regional Universities Network, Australian Library and Information Association, and the Council of Australian University Librarians, National Libraries Australia, and state library organisations such as Public Libraries Victoria.

### ***Future Research***

Several avenues for future research are recommended. As identified by Howlett et al. (2017), research should explore RRR low-SES students' current access to support at their local public library for their study, learning, and wellbeing needs. This could build upon the existing work of Devlin and McKay's (2017) eight key factors relating to regional and low-SES student success. Research can also identify opportunities for additional support to be provided in response to RRR low-SES students' needs, through partnerships between public libraries and universities.

Additionally, a comprehensive investigation of RRR low-SES students' use of their local public library for study and learning support, services, and facilities is needed, similar to the American study conducted by Behr and LaDell-Thomas (2014). Gaps between student needs and usage of library support and services would indicate ideal areas for partnership.

Research to map the impacts and outcomes of existing partnerships Australia-wide between public libraries and universities to support RRR low-SES students is also needed, with limited case studies existing thus far (Hill & McGowan, 2014a; Mountford, 2011).

Further research into these areas can influence the professional learning of both public library and university staff on the evidence-based practices needed to strategically guide sustainable partnerships. It can also be used to enhance existing partnership practices and add to the literature on public libraries and universities working together.

## **Conclusion**

Students from low-SES backgrounds living in RRR communities experience multiple inequalities leading to lower student success when compared to their on-campus peers. Partnerships between public libraries and universities can help improve RRR low-SES student success through providing access to face-to-face learning support, resources, and reliable technology. This study involved five institutions exploring how Australian public libraries and universities can partner together to support RRR and low-SES student success. The findings identified public libraries primarily provide access to reliable internet and technology, with face-to-face learning support provided through empathy, exam supervision, and referral to information and resources. Limitations in support were due to participants' insufficient data on local students' needs, small budgets, and their community-focussed mission. Key elements of successful partnerships established between public libraries and universities include communication, information sharing, established roles, goal setting, and

sustainability. Recommendations were provided to guide partnerships between public libraries and universities to support RRR low-SES student success. These include best practice for successful partnerships, professional development for public library and university staff, and future research. Overall, partnerships between public libraries and universities can improve RRR low-SES student success through increasing access to face-to-face learning support, open textbooks and resources, and reliable internet and technology.

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