Softlink Australian School Library Survey
A five-year review

The Softlink Australian School Library Survey provides information on key trends and issues affecting Australian school libraries. The survey was initiated in 2010 to form a response to the Australian Government's Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools. Softlink has continued to survey Australian schools annually, and in 2015, extended the survey to include New Zealand schools.

This article presents a five-year review (2010–2014) of the trends and issues reflected in the survey responses. It includes additional findings from Softlink's recently released _2015 Australian and New Zealand School Library Survey Report_.

Similar information was presented in a keynote presentation at the 2015 ASLA Conference in September by Susan Gan and Nathan Godfrey.

Survey background

Softlink Managing Director Nathan Godfrey recalls the initial discussions about what the company could contribute to the 2010 Federal Inquiry. Nathan said:

We wanted to contribute to the Inquiry to support school libraries in Australia, and given that about one in two schools in Australia uses a Softlink product, we felt that we could contribute something unique.

The concept of an independent survey was formulated. It brought together two threads that Softlink had been working on at that time.

Firstly, we had been doing quite a bit of research on the linking of data present in the library system with literacy outcomes for students. And secondly, after many conversations, and fresh off the GFC, we had the desire to assist school libraries to address what was a theme of a loss of resources being allocated to them. And so the survey was created.

In 2010 Softlink used the findings of the Australian School Library Survey to provide a submission to the Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools. As part of the submission, Softlink made three recommendations to the Inquiry:

1. That an Australia-wide study be commissioned to identify and quantify the relationship between library funding, access to teacher librarians and literacy outcomes.

2. That a mechanism be established by which the funding and allocation of teacher librarian resources to school libraries is monitored and reported so as to allow consistent policies on school libraries to be developed and adopted across major education providers in Australia.

3. That school libraries that have received federal government funding be reviewed for adequate ongoing annual budgets to ensure the library is adequately resourced.

schools. The first combined *Australian and New Zealand School Library Survey Report* was released in April 2016.

Budget and resourcing trends

Each year, respondents are asked how their school library's budget changed from the prior year. A combined five-year analysis (2010–2014) indicates that only 17% to 20% of schools reported budget increases over the time frame. Disappointingly, the same analysis indicates that 25% to 30% of schools reported budget decreases over the time frame. Each year, around 50% of

'... school libraries and teacher librarians are a vital and irreplaceable part of our students' education. School libraries that are properly resourced, and led by passionate, engaged individuals with a vision for the role their library plays within the school community, improve educational outcomes.'

Following the Inquiry, Softlink has continued to conduct the survey, analysing the results and distributing a report every year. Nathan continued:

We believe that school libraries and teacher librarians are a vital and irreplaceable part of our students' education. School libraries that are properly resourced, and led by passionate, engaged individuals with a vision for the role their library plays within the school community, improve educational outcomes. The core of what we have always sought to achieve is to facilitate and assist advocacy.

The survey has evolved to explore a number of topical issues and participation rates have grown to one in eight Australian

respondents indicate that their budget did not change from the previous year.

Nathan Godfrey said that the number of budget decreases, and lack of budget increases reported over the time frame was disappointing.

There's no allowance in the figures for ordinary CPI increases. To keep up with the cost of living, school library budgets should have increased 10% over the period.

On a more positive note, recent data is beginning to show a turnaround for school library budgets, with more schools reporting an increase and fewer schools reporting decreases to their annual budget. The 2014 and 2015 data has portrayed a more positive outlook for school libraries.

FTE Staff by Role and School Type Australia
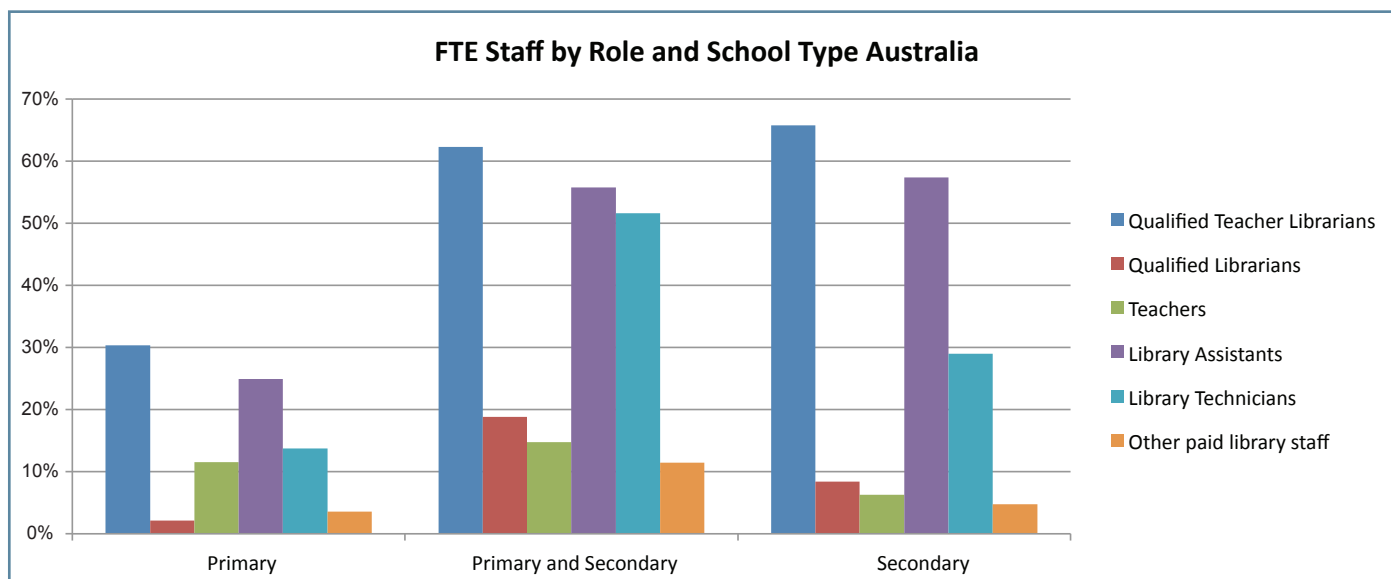
Graph 1

Nathan explained:

Since 2013 the number of surveyed schools reporting budget reductions has reduced from 33% of respondents to 24%. Even more encouragingly, the number of respondents that indicated that their school library budget was unchanged or greater than the prior year rose from 67% to 76% over the same period.

From a resourcing perspective, the Softlink survey asks respondents to provide data on the full-time equivalent (FTE) staffing levels in their school library. Encouragingly, when analysed at the School Type level, average FTE staffing levels have risen slightly between 2011 and 2015.

In 2011, the breakdown of average FTE staffing levels at Primary, combined Primary and Secondary, and Secondary schools were 1.1, 2.6 and 2.4 respectively. In 2015, the breakdown of average FTE staffing levels at Primary, combined Primary and Secondary, and Secondary schools were 1.5, 3.6 and 2.5 respectively. This represents a small increase for Primary only and Secondary only schools and a slightly more significant increase for combined Primary and Secondary schools.

Additional analysis in 2015 identified the range of positions held by FTE library staff. Graph 1 shows the percentage of Australian schools by type that have at least 1 FTE staff member in each of the roles listed. It was found that 32% of primary schools, 81% of K–12 schools and 74% of Secondary schools have at least 1 FTE qualified teacher librarian or qualified librarian.

Regardless of the type of school, their size, budget or staffing levels, one thing shines through from the comments provided by library staff throughout the history of the Softlink survey — they are passionate about and strongly believe in what they do.

Around the world, we've seen time and time again, that there is no more important resource to any school library than a passionate, energetic and visionary librarian. And it's those people who make us proud to serve school libraries around the world and in particular in Australia and New Zealand.

Innovation and access trends

In his 2015 ASLA Conference presentation, Nathan presented a word cloud of the most common phrases used by respondents and, overwhelmingly, it demonstrates the

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55% of library staff are involved in developing curriculum

58% of library staff teach IT and computer skills on a regular basis

"The library is the heart of a school, and without a librarian, it is but an empty shell"

Jarrett J. Krosoczka
Award winning author and illustrator

40% of library staff plan and teach cooperatively with teachers

School Library Staff
#leaders #partners #teachers
#informationspecialists
#programadvisors

64% of library staff spend over 2 hours a week doing admin tasks

78% of library staff say providing lists of resources for teaching staff is important

25% of library staff email information about interest areas daily

Two thirds of survey respondents are qualified teacher librarians

Statistics from the 2015 Softlink Australian and New Zealand School Library Survey

... it demonstrates the forward-thinking perspectives of Australian school librarians. Discussion on technology, e-books, digital resources, makerspaces and mobile devices dominated the responses.

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Expanding on Nathan's ASLA presentation, Susan Gan, an experienced school librarian and educational consultant at Softlink, explored school library trends represented in the Softlink survey. Susan said that a key trend identified in the 2014 Softlink survey was the increase in initiatives to allow libraries to facilitate online learning for students, both during school hours and during their external study.

School libraries are evolving as technology and educational delivery methods change. School library staff continue to identify opportunities to improve their library

service and better engage with 21st century staff and learners.

The majority of survey respondents recognised the need to embrace technology. Susan said:

Among the comments provided, one pointed out that content creation as well as the research and dissemination of knowledge and information is increasingly a web-based activity for our school communities. The respondent said that it was increasingly vital that solutions are 100% web-based, enabling 24/7 access for the whole school community away from both school and its physical boundaries via web-enabled devices.

Modern learners have become accustomed to information on demand, and the statistics presented in the survey report show that more and more school libraries are investing in the infrastructure to support the transition to digital learning.

When the survey first started exploring the accessibility of library resources in 2012–2013, only 47% of respondent schools indicated that the library catalogue could be accessed from both outside and within the school.

The recent *nbn*™ *Digital Parenting Report* (Colmar Brunton 2015) found that 75% of

all students are learning online at home. Fifty-one per cent of students are accessing online videos at home and 49% are viewing online tutorials as part of their research and homework.

According to respondents from the 2015 Softlink survey, more students are able to access these resources from their own mobile devices. This year, 64% of respondents

However, with 87% of librarians reporting that they believe it is important to provide access to the school library (catalogue, electronic resources, e-books et cetera) from outside the school and outside school hours, combined with a changing approach to hosting and security restrictions at state government departments, the movement towards an online library environment is

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said half or more of their student population have access to a personal mobile device (iPod, iPad, smart phone or other tablet).

This is a significant increase from the 2014 response (43%) and 2013 response (44%) and indicates that the trend towards personal mobile device usage in schools is maturing more rapidly.

School libraries have recognised the online research preferences of 21st century learners and are responding to the demand. The most recent figures from Softlink's Australian School Library Survey show that 58% of respondent schools are now providing students and staff with anywhere, anytime access to the library catalogue, which often includes a number of digital resources that can be accessed when required.

Where 24/7 online access to library resources is not provided, limitations of the library management system, Internet security restrictions and funding appear to be the main reasons behind the decision to keep access limited to within the library or school network only.

likely to see greater upward momentum in the coming years.

Library service trends

Just as technology is allowing libraries to change where and when they connect with the school community, the annual Softlink survey has consistently shown that modern school libraries are eager to transform what it is they offer to the school community.

Respondents have described the modern school library as a vibrant, dynamic hub with a focus on facilitating creation, collaboration and exploration.

For several years, there has been increasing feedback on the different services being implemented to develop this.

It is clear that school library spaces are being repurposed in a number of exciting ways to provide the school community with the tools and space to collaborate, create and learn through social activities.

The makerspace trend emerged in the 2014 survey responses where respondents spoke

of their own efforts to facilitate student-guided exploration of 3D printing, robotics and life skills within the library.

Comments from survey respondents describe innovative ways of repurposing the library space in a budget friendly manner such as getting students and parents involved in running activities in the library, creating a hub for wider interests and hobbies, creating virtual spaces and reading rooms.

School librarians also recognise that the library offers intrinsic value to more structured school educational programs and, as such, is a major learning environment for students.

The modern school library is offering the school community the ability to explore guided enquiry, flipped classrooms and other resource-based technologies.

Respondents also felt that the development of information and creative thinking skills are the responsibility of the library and offer potential for increased library use and engagement with educational practices and learning outcomes.

e-resources trends

In addition to changes in social and learning activities offered by school libraries, survey respondents have consistently commented that e-resources, including digital resources, digital media, digital content and e-books, are the biggest opportunity for transformation when it comes to what they provide to their communities.

The Softlink survey has tracked the uptake of e-books in Australian schools since the survey began. At the time e-books were only an emerging trend, both in Australian school libraries and the wider community — although dedicated e-readers had been available for a number of years, the iPad

had only been released earlier that year and e-books were only just becoming popular.

It should come as no surprise then that in 2010 only 20% of the responding schools reported that they had e-books in the library collection and, furthermore, only 39% thought it was a possibility that they would purchase e-books for the library in the following 12 months.

The data collected over the subsequent years has highlighted how quickly the Australian school library can adapt to change.
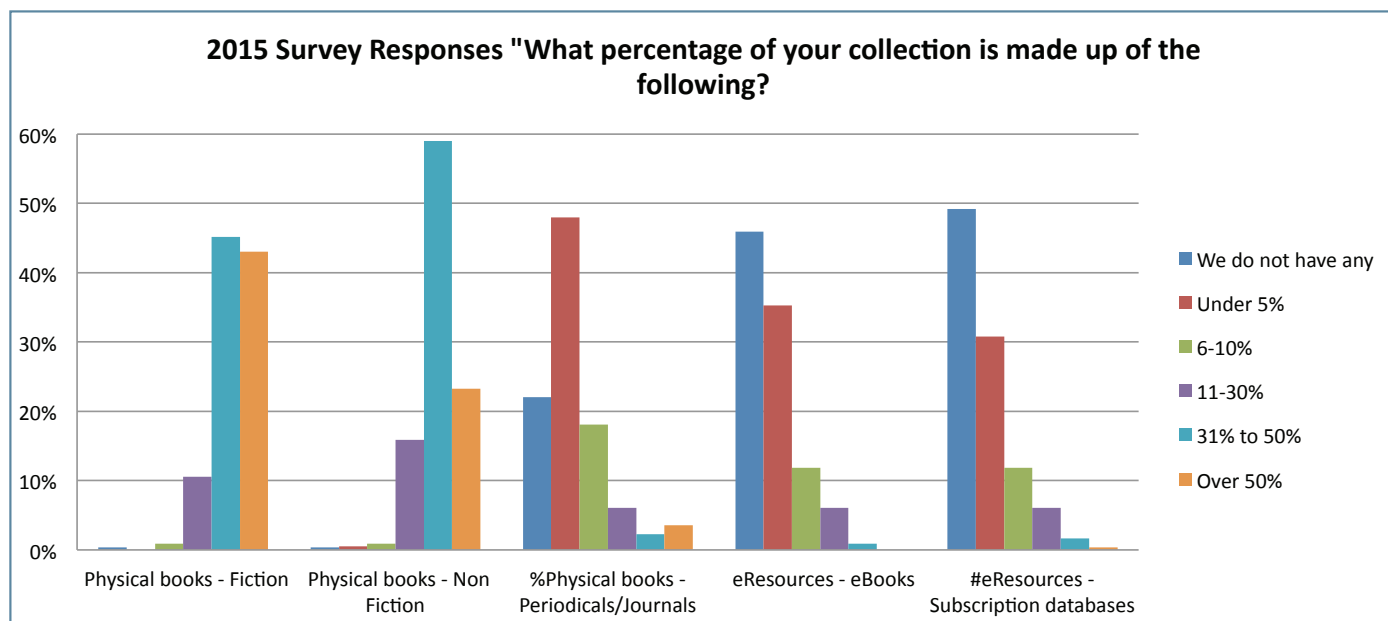
The latest report shows that in 2015 almost 55% of Australian schools now include e-books in their collection and 56% of the respondents intend to purchase e-books for their library in 2016.

Despite the enthusiasm for e-resources, additional data shows that school libraries are blending these new offerings with the traditional as opposed to abandoning physical resources entirely.

There are a number of explanations given by respondents for why school libraries are using e-resources to complement, instead of replace, physical resources. Susan said:

A number of respondents highlighted issues regarding the range offered by publishers and the restrictive conditions they set. Others were grappling with the affordability of e-books and the technology to support their roll-out — a number of schools pointed out that they also needed to factor in the cost of providing appropriate devices for students to access e-resources from.

However, another recurrent explanation from respondents was students' reading preferences. Teacher librarians regularly comment in the Softlink survey that students have a preference for hard copies

2015 Survey Responses "What percentage of your collection is made up of the following?

Legend:
- We do not have any
- Under 5%
- 6-10%
- 11-30%
- 31% to 50%
- Over 50%

X-axis: Physical books - Fiction | Physical books - Non Fiction | %Physical books - Periodicals/Journals | eResources - eBooks | #eResources - Subscription databases

Graph 2

Despite the enthusiasm for e-resources, additional data shows that school libraries are blending these new offerings with the traditional as opposed to abandoning physical resources entirely.

of books for recreational reading, but are looking for online and digital resources in their research.

The observed preference for hard copy books is supported by children's book sale figures. At the 2015 Nielsen Children's Book Summit data was presented that showed the children's share of the Australian and New Zealand print markets is averaging almost 50%, and that international e-book sales had reduced by 14%.

In concluding, Softlink Managing Director Nathan Godfrey expressed his enthusiasm for continuing the annual survey in order to provide Australian and New Zealand schools with tools that are of value in their own advocacy. He encouraged schools to continue to participate in the annual survey

and also said that he hoped to see even more schools participate in the future in order to gain a thorough insight into the state of school libraries.

Reference

Colmar Brunton 2015, *nbn™ Digital Parenting Report*, research commissioned by nbn™, undertaken by Colmar Brunton, p. 5.

Additional resources

The 2015 *Australian and New Zealand School Library Survey Report* can be downloaded from the Resources area of the Softlink Web Site http://www.softlinkint.com/

Additional resources, including the *What's Trending #SchoolLibraries* feature, which explores feedback trends from the 2015 survey, are also available.