

Citizens' Living Rooms: Libraries in Finland

Finland's library system is second to none. Finnish libraries are an important part of civic culture, and are the second highest rated public service in the country after drinking water.¹ The Finns are among the most avid library users in the world, so much so that libraries are referred to as "citizens' living rooms".² In 1994, the Helsinki City Library became the first public library in the world to be connected to the internet.³ Since then, libraries across Finland have invested in new technologies to ensure libraries remain relevant to Finnish citizens. In 2016, the UN named Finland the world's most literate nation.⁴



Above: Oodi library in Helsinki⁵

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By Agatha Court

Oodi

Oodi ("ode" in English) is Helsinki's new \$163 million library, opened in 2018 and built across from the Finnish parliament. It is one of many new, state of the art libraries being built across Nordic countries. Helsinki's mayor Jan Vapaavuori described the importance of Oodi to Finnish identity as it "symbolises education, equality, transparency, civilisation itself. In today's world. It symbolises the need to defend democracy".⁶ The building itself is an example of the philosophy Finns have towards libraries: it is better described as an indoor public square. It is a large, light-filled building with a cinema, a restaurant, a hall, a skills workshop with 3D printers and sewing machines, musical studios and, of course, over 100,000 books.

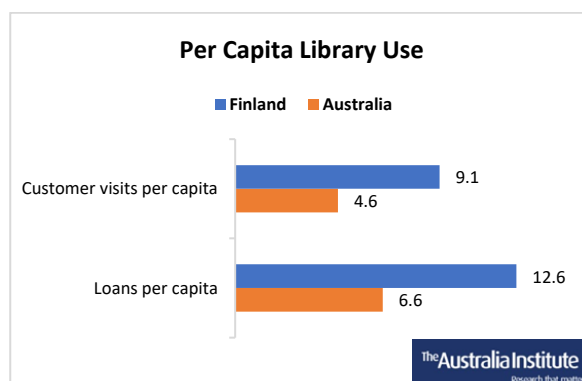
Library access as a right

Under the Finnish Library Act, every municipality must provide library services. Due to this requirement, 70% of Finns live within 3km of a library and 94% of Finns live within 10km.⁷ Enshrined in the Library Act are the objectives of the Finnish library project, which include "equal opportunities for everyone to access education and culture" and "active citizenship, democracy and freedom of expression."⁸

Finland's focus on creating a culture that embraces and invests in civic engagement and education means it has some of the highest per capita engagement with libraries in the world.

Comparing Finland and Australia

Despite many positives including the recent major refurbishment of the state library of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia lags behind Finland in engagement and investment in libraries. From Finland's population of 5.4 million, Finnish libraries received 49,369,464 visits in 2016, or 9.14 visits per capita.⁹ In comparison, Australia received 114,284,534 library visits the same year, or 4.6 per capita. Australians borrow 6.6 books per capita, in comparison to 12.6 books borrowed by Finns. Finland achieves this greater engagement by investing nearly double the funding per capita that Australia does on libraries - \$94.79 compared to \$49.11.¹⁰



¹ Riddy (2019) *Finland's new library speaks volumes about the world's most literate nation*,
<https://www.newstatesman.com/spotlight/skills/2019/03/finland-s-new-library-speaks-volumes-about-world-s-most-literate-nation>

² Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2016) *Finland is one of the top countries in the world in the field of library services*,
<https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/4150031/Library+services/65df0ce2-685f-4c3c-9686-53c108641a5c/Library+services.pdf>

³ Helling (2012) *Public Libraries and their National Policies*,
<https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/public-libraries-and/9781843346791/xhtml/B9781843346791500063.htm>

⁴ Reith-Banks (2018) *The borrowers: why Finland's cities are havens for library lovers*,
<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/may/15/why-finlands-cities-are-havens-for-library-lovers-oodi-helsinki>

⁵ Kuvio, *Photos of Oodi*, <https://www.oodihelsinki.fi/en/for-media/#photosofoodi>

⁶ Riddy (2019) *Finland's new library speaks volumes about the world's most literate nation*,
<https://www.newstatesman.com/spotlight/skills/2019/03/finland-s-new-library-speaks-volumes-about-world-s-most-literate-nation>

⁷ Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2016) *Finland is one of the top countries in the world in the field of library services*,
<https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/4150031/Library+services/65df0ce2-685f-4c3c-9686-53c108641a5c/Library+services.pdf>

⁸ Public Libraries Act (2016), <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2016/en20161492.pdf>

⁹ Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2016) *Finland is one of the top countries in the world in the field of library services*,
<https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/4150031/Library+services/65df0ce2-685f-4c3c-9686-53c108641a5c/Library+services.pdf>

¹⁰ State Library of Queensland (2019) *Australian Public Libraries Statistical Report 2016-2017*,
https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/aust_pub_lib_stats_report_2016-17_final_7.pdf
