CREATIVE COMMUNITIES
The cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries

FOREWORD

Creative Communities completes a trilogy of major research reports from the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network about the breadth, depth and impact on the whole community of services offered by the modern public library. While *Libraries Building Communities* (2005) and *Dollars, Sense and Public Libraries* (2011) focussed on the social contribution and economic value of public libraries, *Creative Communities* focusses on the cultural benefits that public libraries deliver to their communities.

The report highlights the important (and often under-recognised) range of activities undertaken by Victoria's public libraries that produce specifically cultural benefits, which community members may not otherwise access. Their evolution as part of public library services demonstrates the pivotal role the public library plays in community life by: nurturing creativity, learning and play; opening up unknown and unexpected potentialities; bringing both like-minded and differently-minded people together; providing access to knowledge, ideas, connections and discussion; bringing to diverse groups a range of arts and cultural experiences – such as author talks, exhibitions, and performances.

Drawing on quantitative data, extensive community consultation and case studies from public libraries across the state, *Creative Communities* makes a compelling case for public libraries as long-term and dynamic contributors to Victoria's cultural landscape, and shows how their role is evolving as they are increasingly being used to showcase and support community creativity.

We would like to thank the project team of State Library and public library staff, Victorian public library managers, Annie Talvé and Dr Sally Gray from Project Sisu, and all those who have contributed to *Creative Communities*. It has been a groundbreaking initiative, the first in-depth Australian study of the cultural benefits of public libraries, and one of very few studies of its kind worldwide.

We believe the report provides inspiring reading and adds a new dimension to our understanding of the complex and evolving role of public libraries. It is our hope that it will greatly assist library managers and others who plan and advocate for public library services, and will influence those who make decisions about investment in public library services.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

The purpose of *Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* is to shed light on the cultural benefits that public libraries deliver to Victorian communities. The study records the breadth and depth of cultural activities occurring in Victorian public libraries, and invites library users, staff and stakeholders to join a wide-ranging discussion about the cultural dimensions of libraries and the meaning and value of libraries to them as citizens.

Culture, as described in this report, refers to two interrelated concepts:

- the values and aspirations held by various communities, and the ways that they accommodate, debate and expand these values and aspirations to create a dynamic culture

- culture is also used in its familiar sense, encompassing arts and creative expression.

In both senses of the word 'culture', public libraries are playing a dynamic role within their communities. The study shows that Victoria's public libraries are engaged in a range of cultural activities and processes. These activities are explicitly cultural in the sense of artistic endeavors of various kinds, and are implicitly cultural in the sense that they help animate the cultural life of communities across the state. (20)

Victorian public libraries are significant 'culture-making social entities'. They are, in other words, places where culture is being 'celebrated, explored, passed on, threatened, tested, revisited, examined, developed, expanded, diminished, reinterpreted, reinvented, transformed and adapted'.

Endnotes are used throughout this report to reference publications and people used as sources of information. For further detail, see Bibliography and Notes.

The new and dynamic ways in which public libraries are performing a cultural role can be seen as a form of participatory creativity. People are using space in libraries to:

- learn new crafts
- exhibit artworks
- compose music
- celebrate diverse cultures through song, dance and festivals
- generate multimedia works using the library's original collections
- draw, paint, build and perform.

This participatory creativity is combined with the traditional cultural offerings that remain at the core of public libraries: reading, literary and literacy activities, and spreading ideas in written and spoken form.

Victorian public libraries are hybrid cultural sites; they attract a diverse clientele and provide spaces in which cultural cross-pollination can occur; they are spaces that stimulate discussion, debate, learning, and knowledge creation. The cultural activities and processes occurring in Victorian public libraries represent the democratisation of creative potential in communities across the state.
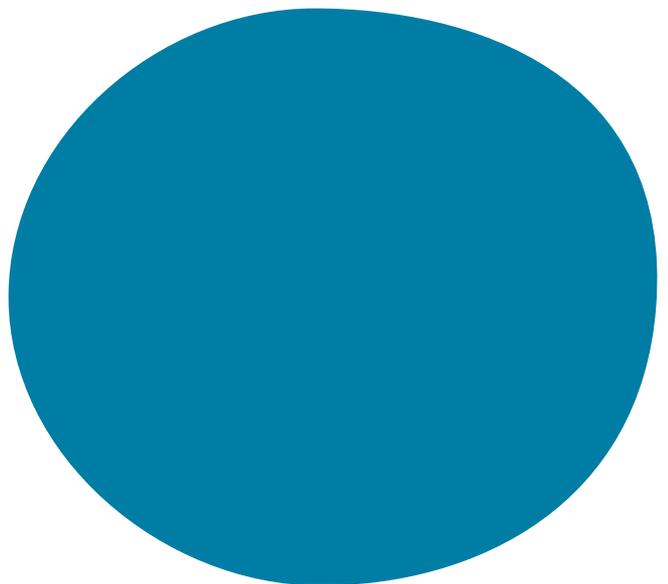
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research for *Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* involved gathering data of various kinds: online surveys; a range of consultative activities; and a literature review spanning international library research, cultural studies, cultural economics and urban studies.

The field research took place in 2013. It involved facilitated workshops with library users, staff and stakeholders across Victoria; interviews and small group discussions; three online surveys; and a facilitated roundtable discussion in which urban and cultural thinkers, as well as arts and library professionals, shared insights about the cultural value and positioning of public libraries.

All of the research activities attracted high levels of participation and engagement. In keeping with the cultural focus of the study, people's impressions, associations, preferences and insights about public libraries were invited. This approach was warmly received by participants in workshops and interviews, and was reflected in the open, thoughtful responses to the online surveys. A summary of the research activities is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Field Research Summary

Workshops	14 workshops in total: 7 workshops with library staff; and 7 workshops with library users, local government representatives and other stakeholders	Belmont, Bendigo, Echuca, Fitzroy, Footscray, Horsham, Kerang, Melbourne City, Warragul, Waurn Ponds
Interviews	27 taped and fully transcribed interviews	Library managers/staff, cultural/arts managers, artists, economists, farmers, councillors, community representatives
Small groups	10	Young people (5–12), young adults (17–30), working adults (30–45), seniors (over 60)
Library visits	23	Visit locations: Belmont, Bendigo, Camberwell, City Library, Cohuna, Echuca, Fitzroy, Footscray, Geelong, Glen Waverley, Horsham, Kerang, Lalor, Mill Park, Rochester, Sale, St Arnaud, Stawell, Thomastown, Warracknabeal, Warragul, Waurn Ponds, Yarram
Online surveys	3 Online Surveys Library user survey Library staff survey Library service data collection	2747 respondents 438 respondents 40 library services responded
Roundtable	Held at State Library of Victoria in October 2013	15 participants

RESEARCH PROCESS AND FINDINGS

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Defining culture is an ongoing and evolving process. Culture is often described in broad terms, encompassing everything that constitutes a set of values and beliefs leading to a particular way of life; or it is described in more narrow terms to denote 'arts'-type cultural activities. Measurement of the impacts of culture is also a developing field, with various 'cultural indicators' projects underway in Australia. Libraries are usually classified in government data as 'cultural institutions', their holdings registered as cultural assets, and their visitation rates and employment figures included in Australian cultural data collection – yet the ways that libraries contribute to culture-making and the cultural benefits they generate are rarely central to public policy discussion about cultural development. However, this study shows that libraries generate a wide range of cultural benefits – intrinsic and extrinsic – that range from nurturing cultural diversity to facilitating opportunities for artists.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings can be viewed and analysed using the Six Lenses framework. The lenses are described below.

Lens 1: Libraries as public places of cultural meaning and significance

Creating focal points for local identity, security and sustainability; local, regional and urban place-making and precinct building

Victorian public libraries are seen as safe, non-commercial, culturally meaningful places. They are free and open to all members of the public. Public libraries hold in trust diverse, changing and responsive collections for the present and future of Australian society, and they do this in sometimes beautiful, iconic buildings, which have often become cultural touchstones for local communities. In a number of places across Victoria, new or expanded libraries have become the nucleus for building cultural precincts.

Lens 2: The culture of library spaces

Experimenting and innovating with library space; optimising space in a material, psychological and creative sense

Library spaces have a material, psychological and creative dimension. In surveys, workshops and interviews, the characteristics of library spaces and the importance of space design were strongly emphasised. Young adults, in particular, when given a choice, will choose to frequent libraries that meet their aesthetic as well as functional needs. Library staff members, working in well-designed new or refurbished spaces, report excitement about the cultural programs and opportunities now made available by flexible use of space in their libraries.

People who use Victorian public libraries frequently described them as vibrant, comfortable, contemporary and resource-rich. They are perceived as welcoming psychological spaces, being described as safe, calm, enjoyable, something to be proud of, a haven, and even sacred. Library spaces are also seen as creative spaces, often called beautiful, or associated with curiosity, wonder and potential. They are seen as spaces within which storytelling, serendipitous discovery and imaginative play can occur. Numerous comments were received about library spaces being available to everyone in the community, and the careful balancing of quiet and active spaces within libraries was a critical concern for many people, across all age groups.

Lens 3: Libraries incubating creativity

Facilitating the production of creative content; supporting, disseminating and showcasing multi-faceted creative endeavour

Libraries are currently incubating community creativity in many ways. They facilitate cultural expression and imaginative thinking, and support culture-making in a variety of forms. Some libraries have highly successful exhibition spaces and programs to support emerging artists and performers.

Survey data gathered from 40 Victorian public library services as part of *Creative Communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* shows that between 2011 and 2013, Victorian libraries hosted an estimated 1139 theatre, music and poetry performances; 6649 creative workshops and classes; 719 art exhibitions and installations; and 1391 public lectures. Many people use public libraries as sites for creative production. 436 survey respondents – identifying themselves as writers, graphic novelists, artists, academics, students, illustrators, animators, performers, poets, craftspeople, knitters, cake decorators and fashion designers – use their library to enable creative production in some form. Research responses show that people value the cultural dimension of their library, and want libraries to assume a bigger role in this sphere. Respondents have ideas about what they would like libraries to do, ranging from hip-hop and photography classes, to poetry slams and performance art.

Lens 4: Libraries as cultural connectors

Linking up; sharing resources; seeding community-driven cultural activities; undertaking various forms of outreach

Libraries connect people with each other; they connect people with art, literature, ideas and many forms of creativity. They forge cultural links across precincts, communities and regions, and with other culture-making organisations and individuals. They induct new people into communities and help them navigate the social and cultural networks that promise a sense of belonging.

Lens 5: Libraries supporting Australia's complex cultural mosaic

Interweaving different cultural groups; celebrating and nurturing diversity; stimulating cross-cultural conversation and understanding

Victoria's public libraries have responded in imaginative and innovative ways to maintain and nurture Australia's diverse, multicultural society. Libraries:

- promote and support diverse narratives, identities and heritage for a variety of new and established community groups
- curate Indigenous collections and host Indigenous storytelling
- welcome new arrivals, providing orientation information in English and an evolving range of other languages
- curate and disseminate LOTE (Languages other than English) collections, take part in multicultural festivals, and provide meeting spaces for community, local history and heritage groups.

A working philosophy of harmony and social and cultural cohesion underpins the public library service ethic, and the role libraries play in supporting Australia's cultural diversity is highly valued by community members. Significant numbers of respondents registered their belief that multicultural societies flourish when cultural events are shared.

Lens 6: Libraries nurturing the culture of the written and spoken word

Reading, literacy, storytelling, writing, critiquing and discussing ideas in written and spoken form

Victorian public libraries support an extraordinary range and volume of word, literacy and literary-based activities. These are much loved by users, and cross age, gender and cultural differences.

In the two-year period from July 2011 to June 2013, Victorian public libraries:

- facilitated an estimated 41,257 story and rhyme-time sessions, and 1890 author talks
- participated in numerous literary festivals
- conducted 8175 literacy classes
- coordinated 6203 book/reading/discussion groups for adults
- hosted 1391 public lectures.

The work libraries do in nurturing the written and spoken word in country areas is especially significant, with literary events considered vitally important for regional communities.

PROPOSITIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Public libraries are making a significant contribution to cultural life in Victoria. They attract community support on a scale (and with an intensity of participation) achieved by few other cultural institutions. Public libraries nurture creativity, learning and play; they provide access to knowledge, ideas, connections and discussion. They bring a range of specific arts and cultural experiences to diverse groups, fostering vibrant community interactions and possibilities.

The cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries will be enhanced by:

- greater visibility
- more consistent promotion
- the availability of flexible library spaces
- the evolution of diverse staff skills
- stronger partnerships with other cultural institutions and organisations
- access to a greater range of funding streams
- public confidence about the established cultural role libraries perform in their communities.

This report complements previous research linking public libraries with economic and social benefits. Its findings support the view that public libraries are also significant culture-making entities.

CONTEXT

BACKGROUND

Victorian public libraries, like public libraries around the world, perform multiple roles within their communities. In most cases, the funding base for Victoria's public libraries is drawn from local government budgets, supplemented by state funding agreements and federal grants. In many suburban, regional and rural settings across Victoria, public library services represent a significant investment.

Table 2: Statistical snapshot of Victoria's public libraries, 2012–13

$209,918,671 spent on public library service delivery
47 municipal public library services
253 static public library service points
27 mobile public libraries, visiting 305 different sites
26,762,275 visits to public libraries by customers
11,635,624 virtual visits via public library websites
1,352,649 attendees at public library programs
2,579,742 members of public libraries

Data collected from the Victorian Public Library Annual Statistical Survey 2012-13

While libraries are financially resource-intensive – in terms of buildings, staffing, ongoing collection development, technology needs, and the need to update library spaces to meet changing usage and new service demands – previous research shows that they deliver significant value for money, are heavily used, and much appreciated by their communities (41, 44).

The Public Libraries Victoria Network, together with the State Library of Victoria, has previously commissioned research into the diverse roles and benefits of public libraries, including economic and social impact studies. Published in 2011, *Dollars, Sense and Public Libraries* (44) demonstrated that Victorian public libraries provide an estimated $3.56 in benefits to their communities for every $1 spent. This level of return is the same as, or better than, the return on investment from other state government spending.

While 48 per cent of Victorians were registered library users, around 80 per cent of study participants, both library users and non-users, in *Dollars, Sense and Public Libraries*, supported increased investment in public libraries. The report estimated it would cost around $419 per household per year to replace what public libraries currently provide free of charge. Economic impact studies commissioned by other Australian state libraries have produced similar results (41, 42, 46).

The State Library of Victoria, in partnership with Public Libraries Victoria Network, also commissioned research into the social impact of public libraries. The study *Libraries Building Communities* demonstrated that public libraries make a vital contribution to a range of positive social outcomes (45). Public libraries:

- provide free public access to computer and information technology resources
- help people locate information, thus creating better-informed communities
- run programs that promote lifelong learning and literacy in the community
- build connections between individuals, groups and government (2, 3, 41).

Subsequent studies confirm a strong link between the services provided by public libraries and the behaviours, skills, attitudes and values that support the development of more tolerant and cohesive societies (2, 50, 51, 52).

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND CULTURAL LIFE

Public libraries play an important part in the cultural life of their communities. Increasingly, libraries are being described as places where creativity and imagination can flourish, and where creative content production can occur (27). *Victorian Public Libraries 2030* (42) presents a summary of the global trends influencing public libraries and the strategic options available in planning for the future. The report presents two scenarios available to Victorian public libraries as they respond to these emerging trends. One scenario emphasises the community learning and connection role of public libraries; while the other emphasises the creative potential of public libraries as sites for supporting and sharing individual and collective creative endeavour. The Creative scenario described in *Victorian Public Libraries 2030* is an extension of what is already happening in public libraries around the world. In social media, blogs, library conferences and journals, public libraries are emerging as creative cultural hubs (3, 15, 27, 35, 37, 38). People working in and with public libraries are aware of this trend. However, when it comes to broader public policy discussions and research, the complex cultural role of public libraries has not received the attention it merits.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture and cultural activity tend to attract multiple definitions. Common usage equates 'culture' with 'the arts', but the word 'culture' is also used to include everything that people do as they go about their daily lives. Sometimes described as a set of learned behaviours shared by a group and reinforced through interaction, culture is also described as a dynamic and often contested process involving ideas, symbols, products and practices that come together in 'culturally' specific ways (10). There are many agents of culture, many tangible and intangible ways in which cultures are shaped by the people and institutions from which they are constituted.

Australian cultural researcher Jon Hawkes (20) describes culture as a value system that leads to action of some kind: actions that ultimately shape the world in which we live. If cultural action is defined too narrowly as an instrument for economic development or a vehicle for social policy, the vitality inherent in a broader understanding of culture may be lost. This broader understanding would include the way in which 'culture in action' encourages diversity, social engagement, human enrichment and wellbeing, local distinctiveness, civic skills, social and cultural sustainability, vitality, creativity and innovation. If culture makes communities, then vibrant and cohesive communities will need workable levels of shared experience, understanding, respect and trust in order to realise their potential. In this sense, Hawkes argues, culture is the glue that enables these complex relationships to develop (20).
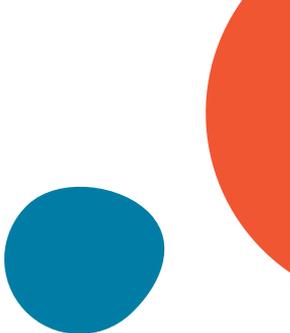
TALKING ABOUT CULTURE

Cultural expression and activity are increasingly seen as important elements in urban planning, tourism, global competitiveness and community wellbeing. So, along with the general public, stakeholders in cultural policy discussions include cultural economists and economic geographers, arts bureaucrats and policy makers, artists, cultural workers, urban planners and architects, politicians and statisticians, cultural theorists, commentators and academics.

With significant amounts of public money invested in cultural activities and institutions, funders are keen to justify this expenditure and to find ways to describe its value – as are the cultural producers. This has led to a focus on statistical cultural measures that capture the volume of activities, returns on investment, rates of participation, financial value of cultural collections, number of jobs created, tourism visitation figures, the extent of media commentary generated, and so on. While this approach is important, it favours an instrumental evaluation of culture, with the more complex ways in which people participate in culture-making being less well articulated (8, 13, 16, 32, 33).

National discussions on libraries, culture and cultural planning tend to focus on the important role of the large public libraries, such as the National Library of Australia and the various state and territory libraries, as sites that contain significant cultural assets. Vital Signs, a nationwide cultural indicators project initiated by the Cultural Ministers Council, aims to measure the contribution made to Australia's economic development, social engagement and cultural value by the various industries and organisations in the arts and culture sectors. Along with cultural assets, employment in the library sector and relatively high visitation rates are recorded. (6, 14).

In 2013, the federal government produced its first cultural policy document for over a decade: *Creative Australia* (7). *Creative Australia* notes the important collecting role of public libraries and their critical ongoing role in facilitating aspects of the 'digital economy' strategy. Other discussion papers relating to cultural indicators focus more narrowly on 'the arts', particularly regional and community-based arts activities, and generally have little to say about the way in which public libraries are participating in the cultural field (11, 12).

Australia's public libraries are acknowledged and described in *Creative Australia* as cultural institutions in the obvious sense that they involve collection and dissemination of knowledge and knowledge-producing artefacts, such as books, art and local history collections. However, the ways that public libraries contribute to culture-making appears to be more often assumed than explained. The lack of research linking public libraries with specific cultural benefits makes advocacy difficult for public library managers seeking recognition and funding to support their library's role as a cultural player.
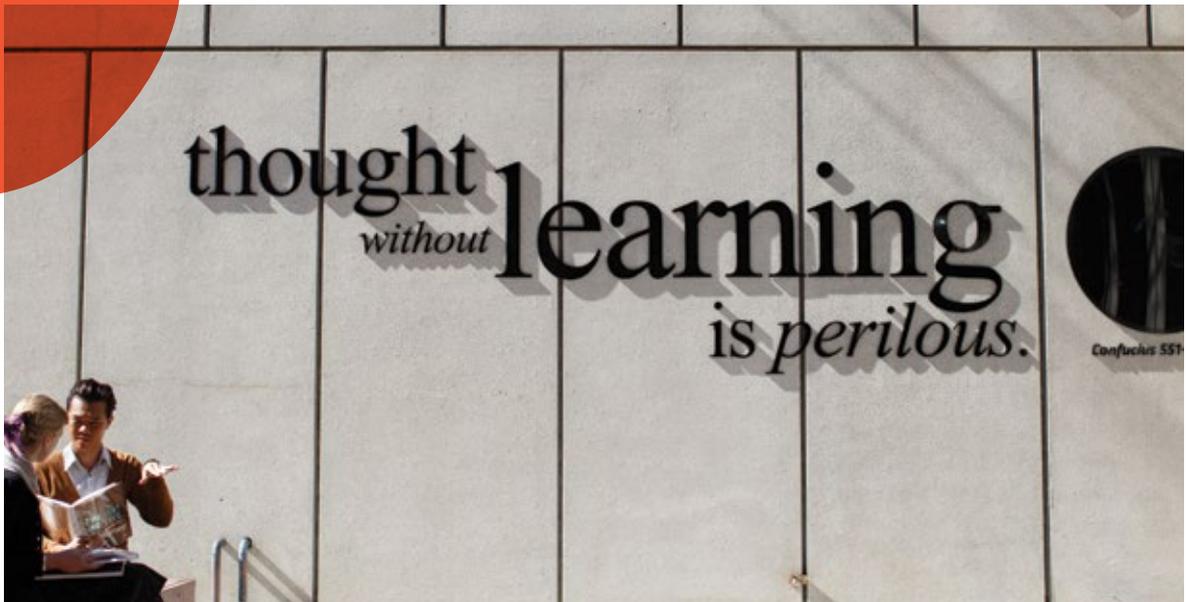
CULTURE-MAKING IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Hawkes argues that it is important for governments to identify what he calls the prime 'culture-making' social entities if they are to stay in touch with, and be responsive to, the cultures of the communities they serve. These culture-making social entities are sites in which culture is 'celebrated, explored, passed on, threatened, tested, revisited, examined, developed, expanded, diminished, reinterpreted, reinvented, transformed and adapted' (20). Hawkes nominates seven areas where culture-making is occurring:

- education and training
- communications and public affairs
- the constructed environment and public facilities
- arts
- history and heritage
- recreation and leisure
- sport.

Activities in public libraries span all of the above categories, with the exception of sport. Libraries attract a broad spectrum of citizens; they invite these citizens to access resources and programs spanning many categories of need and aspiration, from broad-based learning, to digital literacy, to investigating local history, to the creation and enjoyment of artistic expression. It is clear from the reports cited previously (41, 42, 44, 45)

that Australian public libraries are making a contribution across the areas of social interaction listed by Hawkes as characteristic of 'culture-making social entities'. Libraries also represent a set of cultural values in action and they are a medium through which these values are being tested and refined. The emergent ways in which Victorian public libraries are contributing to culture-making, in Hawkes' broad sense of the term, is a complex story that is largely unknown outside the library world.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND CULTURAL RESEARCH

The current study has collected evidence that Victorian public libraries undertake a range of cultural activities. These activities amplify the library's role as a 'culture-making social entity' (20) and seed new forms of participatory creativity. The study involved the following research activities:

- aggregating data collected by Victoria's public library services on the volume and range of cultural activities and events occurring in public libraries over a two-year period (July 2011 to July 2013)
- analysing perceptions about how public libraries are generating and engaging in cultural activities, gathered through online surveys, workshops, interviews and focus groups
- surveying research literature relating to cultural indicators and benefits; the innovative use of library spaces; and the library's emergent role in facilitating learning, social harmony, democratic values and creative expression
- developing the conceptual framework Six Lenses so that the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries can be better understood and described.

DATA COLLECTION SURVEY

Field research for this study took place during 2013. Forty of Victoria's 47 municipal public library services responded to a survey seeking quantitative and qualitative data about cultural activities they delivered between July 2011 and June 2013.

Table 3 summarises the cultural activities undertaken and the number of times each activity took place. Further details about the data collection survey are available in Appendices 1 to 4.

Table 3: Cultural activities of Victorian public library services 2011–2013 (n=40)

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES	VOLUME	LIBRARY SERVICES (no.)
Author talks/readings	1,890	39
Performances (theatre, music, poetry)	1,139	34
Story-time for babies and children	41,257	40
Digital literacy classes/activities	7,259	37
Public lectures by speakers other than authors	1,391	31
Creative classes/activities	6,649	37
Local and family history classes/activities	961	33
Book/reading group discussions	6,203	33
Art exhibitions/installations	719	37
Literacy classes/activities	8,175	28

The Six Lenses framework was created through the research analysis. These Six Lenses are overlapping and interdependent. They provide a framework through which the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries can be seen and understood.

FINDINGS

The Six Lenses offer six interconnected ways to view the varied cultural benefits of Victorian public libraries. These are not isolated benefits, but are linked together in a complex set of relationships, activities and outcomes. They apply in varying ways to all of Victoria's public library services, whether large or small, urban, regional or rural.

The Six Lenses are outlined below.

1. Libraries as public places of cultural meaning and significance
Creating focal points for local identity, security and sustainability; local, regional and urban place-making and precinct building

2. The culture of library spaces
Experimenting and innovating with library space; optimising space in a material, psychological and creative sense

3. Libraries incubating creativity
Facilitating the production of creative content; supporting, disseminating and showcasing multi-faceted creative endeavour

4. Libraries as cultural connectors
Linking up; sharing resources; seeding community-driven cultural activities; undertaking various forms of outreach

5. Libraries supporting Australia's complex cultural mosaic
Interweaving different cultural groups, celebrating and nurturing diversity, stimulating cross-cultural conversation and understanding

6. Libraries nurturing the culture of the written and spoken word and re-valuing literary culture
Reading, literacy, storytelling, writing, critiquing and discussing ideas in written and spoken form

LIBRARIES AS PUBLIC PLACES OF CULTURAL MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE

One of the strongest themes to come out of this study is the value people place on libraries as explicitly public places. Victorian public libraries are seen as safe, welcoming and non-commercial. People have a sense of pride and ownership over public libraries. Even people who do not use a library on a regular basis seem to understand the library's place in the collective imagination.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES BUILD CIVIC SKILLS

Philosopher Bonnie Honig's focus on the importance of what she calls 'public things', and their contribution to the future of democratic societies, is valuable for thinking about libraries as public places. Democracy, argues Honig, is experienced by sharing: if we all have our own private things (pools, parks, entertainment, libraries), we don't have to deal with each other in any meaningful way (21, 22). One of the things democracies do, Honig says, is press us into the friction of engagement and interaction. When you have public things in common, and they require shared stewardship, you are pressed into having to deal with people who may be unlike you. Failing to do so means risking the loss of public things, which are fundamentally the 'things we have in common, even in

our disagreement about them' (21). Honig claims public things help people mature as citizens, helping to cultivate resilience in both psychological and sociopolitical ways. Drawing on the work of psychoanalyst DW Winnicott, Honig argues that 'transitional spaces' such as libraries allow us to relax our defensiveness in response to external pressures, and to experience trust. For Honig (following Winnicott), trust, play, humour and creativity are the foundation stones of culture-making.

Victorian public libraries are archetypes of Honig's 'public things'. Public libraries:

- are free and open to all members of the public, whatever their differences
- receive long-term citizens and recent immigrants with equal degrees of courtesy and service
- hold in trust diverse, changing and responsive collections for the present and future of Australian society.

And all of the above is done in often beautiful or iconic buildings, which are publicly owned.

The *Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* research results show that people think of public libraries as safe, free, open, trusted and neutral places. Survey participants offered the following comments about public libraries:

- 'like a second home'
- 'cannot live without it'
- 'a way to access books when money is tight'
- 'a life-saver when my internet service or printer has broken down'
- 'no limits, I can stay there all day'
- 'helps to create understanding of various cultures and broadens the mind, experiences and horizons'
- 'so inviting on a cold, hot, lonely, whatever day you are having'
- 'a place to drink tea and get away from the cold on a wintery evening/weekend'
- 'has saved my sanity'.

The library is a place that is trusted like a home; 'a holding space', as Honig would put it, out of which we experience a creative reaching out, and over which we share responsibility as if it were our own (21, 22). Even disagreements about what's happening in public libraries today, such as differing views on 'quiet' versus 'noisy' spaces; books on display versus more meeting/lounging space; places for reflection versus 'child-minding centres' – are evidence of a shared sense of responsibility for publicly-owned resources. Some people consulted during the field research were reluctant to voice any critical comments about public libraries for fear that the services might be taken away or downgraded.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES ANIMATE CIVIC PLACES

Victorian public libraries are architecturally diverse. Some retain their Victorian grandeur, such as the State Library of Victoria, and Hawthorn and Fitzroy public libraries. Some are adapted from other uses, such as Swan Hill Library, which was once a supermarket. Many libraries offer a visual anchor to precincts and towns in small but bold ways, as they do in Kerang, Lalor, Altona, St Arnaud and Waurn Ponds. Libraries are often beautifully sited and finished, such as Echuca and Camberwell. They even stimulate the imagination of citizens as they are being built, which has happened in Geelong, Bendigo and Melbourne's Docklands. Libraries can also introduce patrons to the experience of hybrid spaces, where the informational, social and cultural dimensions of library usage are interwoven in new ways, as in the Melton and Melbourne City libraries.

Libraries can energise public places and instil a 'sense of place' in citizens and visitors. The emotional and psychological associations people have with the library as a place can nurture a sense of belonging and self-respect. These associations have social and economic benefits (as described in the Context section) and they also have cultural benefits, because trusted and valued public places that offer the right mix of programs, tools and flexible spaces are more likely to foster cultural exchange and creativity of all kinds (12, 18, 20, 25, 27, 28, 35).

True place-makers, argue Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Skot-Hansen (27), must have something special to offer beyond an iconic building: facilities, activities and experiences that can make a difference to the lives of all citizens.

The re-imagining of Victorian public libraries outlined in the Findings section opens up new arenas for participation in 'public things', by inviting a broad cross-section of the community to claim library spaces as their own. This is facilitated by the flexible design of library buildings and interiors, as explained in Lens 2; but without the collaborative and imaginative mindset of library managers and staff these new spaces could end up replicating traditional library models.

Small service, big vision

The expansion plans for the Sir John Gorton Library in Kerang are part of a broader cultural precinct building enterprise, Gannawarra 2025. The success of the library, particularly as a cultural hub, has played a key role in encouraging decision-makers to opt for a culture-oriented strategy to keep the town vibrant and relevant to its citizens.

'We've got the smallest library service in the state and big visions,' says Gannawarra's Executive Manager for Community Wellbeing, Mandy Hutchinson. Arts and learning are at the centre of Gannawarra 2025. The aims are to attract visitors to Gannawarra and provide amenity to citizens in the shire.

'It's a vision for the future, and it's all about working out and managing where our community is at the moment,' Hutchinson explains. 'We have a lot of challenges: an ageing population, and a declining population in the working-age group. As a council, we needed to look at why this is happening and what we can do to manage it. We believe that a healthy community is important to the sustainability of our community, and the creative precinct is critical.'

Hutchinson summarises Gannawarra's dilemma well: 'We could either manage the cycle of decline or try and break it. We've decided to go in hard and try and break it. The evidence suggests that if you don't manage the cycle of decline, you will get more empty houses, fewer schools and a perception of decay in the community. We plan to reverse the cycle, stabilise the community, increase its size and develop projects that will entice people to come back. Libraries, learning and an arts precinct is what will help us break this cycle. We think it will keep people here, attract new people, and bring more vitality to the town.'

Sustaining places

Geelong is the largest regional city in Victoria. Structural changes to Australia's agricultural, industrial and manufacturing sectors have hit the region hard.

The current priority is to develop Geelong as a creative, knowledge-based city and region. With local, state and Commonwealth funding, a new $45 million library/heritage centre is being built to support Geelong's cultural renewal program. The demand for library services is high. While there were many cultural assets needing renewal, the city library was thought to be in the greatest need, especially in light of contemporary expectations of libraries. Several of Geelong's libraries have undergone redevelopment, and new libraries have been built in Lara, Waurn Ponds and Bannockburn. These libraries are driving revitalisation in the areas they serve.

Geelong's Arts and Culture Manager, Kaz Paton, believes the development of the cultural precinct will engender civic pride, attract visitors and enrich people's experience of and pleasure in the Geelong region.

Paton undertook a Churchill Fellowship in late 2012. She studied creative clusters and precincts in the UK and Europe, including libraries. 'Something I was both told and observed everywhere I went is that the library is a wonderful addition to ordinary life, but even more vital to sustaining community when times get tough,' she says. 'This was particularly evident in Newcastle [UK]. At a time when all public institutions and services were experiencing severe budget cuts, the fact that Newcastle had a stunning new library was a sustaining factor. The library was a warm, safe place, it was free, you could come on your own and be connected, or bring your children without "consumer" pressure but still give them different worlds and experiences to explore. If you build and develop libraries (and other cultural facilities) when you can afford it, they will sustain your community in difficult or grim times. It might be short-term, or a more serious and long-lasting economic downturn, but people will have a welcoming, beautiful place to go to – a sanctuary.'

Research conducted for *Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* found that Geelong libraries are highly valued. One workshop participant referred to them as the 'jewel in our cultural crown'.

Made in Moreland

Moreland City Council is a dense inner-city municipality in Melbourne's north. It is home to an eclectic mix of musicians, writers and filmmakers. To celebrate and preserve this artistic complexity, Moreland's library service created the Made in Moreland collection in 2002 – a program to support and promote local musicians, writers and filmmakers.

As part of Made in Moreland, the library buys CDs by local musicians. Copies are placed in the library's general lending collections, with one copy of each CD also kept in the library's local history collection, thereby preserving Moreland's musical history for future generations. A specially designed 'Made in Moreland' sticker highlights local CDs, as well as books and films by Moreland residents or those with a special connection to the area.

The music sessions 'Live at the Library' bring music to the libraries, showcase Moreland's talent and promote local music. The sessions are presented once a month and rotate between the three branch libraries of Brunswick, Coburg and Glenroy. Local musicians perform for an hour on a Saturday morning or afternoon, giving fledgling bands the opportunity to gain performance experience. The library also supports the annual Brunswick Music Festival, an event that attracts thousands of music lovers.

Genimaree Panozzo, Moreland's Cultural Development Manager, says: 'Made in Moreland was a library initiative back in 2002, and it has really helped Moreland establish a strong local identity. We're lucky to have such a rich pool of musical and artistic talent in our municipality.'

Emerging places

The Docklands community at the western end of Melbourne's CBD is ten years old. Many people are keen to see how the new library complex will enhance the area. Library at The Dock is the result of a public–private partnership between the City of Melbourne, Places Victoria and developer Lend Lease. Alongside traditional library collections, programs and services, it also serves as a community hub for new modes of participation.

The facility includes a community heritage and art gallery. The gallery's ongoing content is a product of close collaboration between the library and the Docklands community. Melbourne Library Service Manager, Paula Kelly, describes this aspect of the project as 'the co-creation of a stunning waterfront space that will help build interest from the local community in the Docklands story.'

Embedded places

Kim Bennett, Creative Arts Facilitator of Regional Arts Victoria, is based in the Swan Hill Library. Working from the library gives her access to the local community: 'Libraries are some of the most frequented public buildings anywhere,' she explains. 'Over 300 people come through the doors of Swan Hill Library every day, and of those 300 about five pop in to see me and ask me to do things for them. They talk to me about their arts practice, or about their children, or their need to get a visa – you name it. That's what comes from being in a library – it provides an opening to all sorts of conversations with people. For me, that sometimes leads on to some pretty extraordinary opportunities and outcomes for the community.'

Striking the right balance

St Arnaud Friends of the Library group has a core constituency of about 30 loyal supporters. Several years ago a proposal to relocate the library to a disused council building away from the main hub of the town divided the community.

'Our library needed to be welcoming and accessible,' says Richard Bazeley, secondary teacher and President of the St Arnaud Friends of the Library group 'It's the centre of cultural life in the town.' An attractive, well-sited library and exhibition space was eventually built adjacent to the council chambers. It is well used and loved by the community, partly because it was so ardently fought for. The Friends group made money from selling culled books, and the funds raised were used for purchasing art works for the new library. The group produces regular art shows and book fairs, and uses the proceeds to buy reference materials for the library.

'The library is a connector for all the things in a community that don't have to do with sport,' says Richard Bazeley. 'It's about balance … about making sure communities have access to sport, leisure and culture.' The Friends group believes that libraries are one of the few public places capable of connecting the social with the cultural.

THE CULTURE OF LIBRARY SPACES

Being in a library is a cultural experience, whether it be reading, working, sitting, dreaming, making, wandering, browsing, listening or performing. Library spaces have a material, psychological and creative dimension. Space itself has the potential to uplift and inspire. The height of ceilings, the sight lines within spaces, the amount of light and colour, the combination of enclosure and openness – are all experienced as part of a cultural domain of spatiality, visuality and kinetics. The availability of library spaces, and their design, contributes to positive cultural experiences and connections. Contemporary library spaces also offer the potential for cultural production and experimentation on a scale that would have been impossible in the past.

The characteristics of library spaces – and the importance of space design – were strongly emphasised in the surveys, workshops and interviews. People commented on the material space, with libraries frequently described as vibrant, comfortable, contemporary and resource-rich. They were also perceived as a psychological space that was safe, welcoming, calm, enjoyable and something to be proud of – even sacred. Library spaces were also seen as creative spaces, often called beautiful, or associated with curiosity, wonder and potential; spaces within which storytelling, serendipitous discovery and imaginative play could occur.

The way public library spaces are currently being envisioned and used is changing, regardless of size, history or location. While the trends associated with this transition have tended to accentuate the creative potential of library spaces, dislodging them from their traditional uses, the direction in which libraries are now heading is also producing complex feelings and reactions among library users and staff. Many people hold seemingly contradictory views about contemporary library spaces, such as needing quiet space but wanting libraries to be active, busy and full of surprises.

The following points about the cultural impact of library spaces were important to research respondents.

- People of all ages want libraries to strike the right balance between providing quiet, reflective and reading/study-oriented spaces and interactive, culturally rich activity or creative spaces.

- The form, functionality and atmosphere of library spaces are critical to their success as cultural spaces.

- There is a positive correlation between the design of library spaces and the degree of creative activity and production occurring within them.

- Young adults 17 to 30 years of age are particularly sensitive to the ambience and design of library spaces.

- The design of online space is important to library users, especially websites and digital interfaces.

FORM, FUNCTION AND ATMOSPHERICS

Library users have sophisticated expectations about what contemporary library spaces can and should be. Few other public spaces are expected by their users to accommodate the multiple needs and functions of contemporary public libraries. While long acknowledged as community spaces, libraries are increasingly being designed and promoted as creative spaces (15, 27, 28). Contemporary purpose-built library spaces are generally designed to be flexible, with moveable shelving, soundproofing, adaptable furniture and hubs, and multipurpose rooms. Increasingly, these more flexible library spaces accommodate cultural activities and programs.

Library users make judgements about the form, function and visual and spatial qualities of public library spaces. They know when a library space is not working, is cramped or dated, and when it employs an old-fashioned service ethic. This sensitivity and knowledge about library spaces was echoed in surveys, interviews and workshops across all age groups.
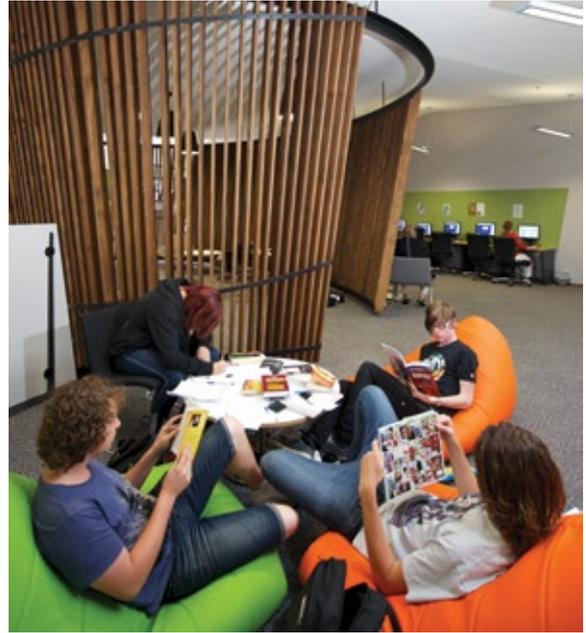
Staff members working in well-designed new or refurbished spaces report excitement about the diverse programs and opportunities they now make available to their communities. Conversely, staff working in old, small or otherwise constrained spaces express frustration about the gap between what they would like to do and what is currently possible. (See Appendix 7 for more comments from the Staff Survey.)

DESIGN AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Creative producers, including students and researchers, need and value libraries for a range of reasons. For many, the aesthetics of library spaces — visual, aural, spatial and tactile — can have a positive impact on their productivity. Emily, a postgraduate student who regularly uses the State Library, City Library and her local library said, 'Walking into a library that's aesthetically pleasing, whether it's beautiful like the State Library or functional and spacious like the City Library, actually makes me do more efficient work. You feel more inspired to work harder when you're in a welcoming environment... it's more conducive being in something that's aesthetically pleasing'.

YOUNG ADULTS

Young adults are particularly sensitive to the design and atmosphere of library spaces. Leonee Derr, Youth Librarian at the City Library, conducted an international study in 2012, focusing on connecting youth and library spaces. 'It's definitely about space, the difference between a geography of yes and a geography of no', she said. She explains that a 'geography of yes' is facilitated by creating flexible and welcoming library spaces, in both physical and psychological ways (58). The creation of a teen hub at Lalor Library is a good example of a 'geography of yes' at work. The after-school teen hub is a popular space to play games, study and meet friends in a locality that has few welcoming public spaces for young people. Teens are responsible for managing the space, along with planning monthly music nights in which they take over the entire library space, install a DJ, play games, eat pizza, and experience what it means to 'own' the library.

Secondary, undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as young working professionals, clearly articulated the differences between what they described as engaging library spaces, and what they saw as austere, unwelcoming, dated places associated only with small children and older adults. This age group frequently used the words 'engaging' and 'unengaging'.

The library as a refuge from highly commercialised spaces was also emphasised. Ed, a postgraduate student in his early 30s, said: 'Library space is needed; just look at how many people have walked past to see if we've finished in here.' Emily, a postgraduate student in her 20s, said: 'Yeah, cafés are pleasant, but you still have to buy something to use them. You don't have to do that in a library though.' Jared, a young doctor and frequent user of the City Library echoed Ed's comments. He said: 'It's a great space... it's non-commercial and there are no strings attached.'

THE RIGHT BALANCE

A recurrent theme in workshops, interviews and survey responses was the need for libraries to provide quiet spaces for reading, refuge and respite from digital overload. The sound of a piano tinkling in the background (City Library), young children singing (Fitzroy Library), an animated story-time or author talk drifting through space, along with the ebb and flow of multiple conversations (Footscray Library), can be comforting. But the need to strike a balance between active and quiet spaces was an issue emphasised by people of all ages.

DIGITAL SPACE

Young adults in workshops and small groups commented on libraries' digital communication spaces, such as websites, online catalogues and social media presence. While the digital interfaces for public libraries often depend on the technology protocols and support received from local councils, these constraints are not well understood by library users. Many described public library websites as clumsy and poorly designed, often letting down the otherwise excellent design of the physical library space. Crafting a consistent and active social media presence was considered an important way of letting people know about the cultural programs and possibilities on offer.

In summary, users considered well-designed public library spaces to have considerable cultural potential – supporting cultural life, creative production and the development of civic participation skills. Users experienced poorly designed or restricted library spaces as a constraint on cultural and creative potential.
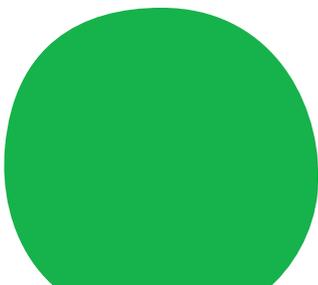
Creative capital city space

Melbourne's City Library in Flinders Lane is one of the busiest libraries in Australia. The City Library has around 100,000 visitors each month. As a capital city service, only 30 per cent of library members are city residents; most visitors are people working or studying in the city. Anyone can become a library member, and many choose the City Library in preference to their local library or university library. It's a dynamic and exciting place, adjacent to popular cafés and a Centre for Adult Education.

The library spans two levels and contains multipurpose meeting rooms, comfortable study and lounge areas, magazine-browsing enclaves, multimedia and music carrels, and reference hubs where library staff members assist regular patrons and visitors. The library also contains a small performance and exhibition space, and has a part-time technician employed to help deliver a busy calendar of visual arts, literature, musical activities and exhibitions. The exhibition space is available to artists, musicians and performers who may otherwise struggle to get access to a city space. Artists and musicians are invited to pitch a concept to the library and, if accepted, they are then charged a modest fee to hang their artworks, advertise the exhibition or musical program, launch the event and return the space to an agreed standard.

The cultural space provided by the City Library has helped emerging artists gain exposure, while established artists and musicians have been able to take their creative ideas in new directions.

By the river

The new Campaspe Regional Library in Echuca opened in August 2012. It looks out on the historic Port of Echuca and Murray River Aquatic Reserve. Since opening, visitor numbers have soared; community participation in a range of cultural events and opportunities has continued to rise. Some of the special interest groups to make the library their home include knitting, crochet, chess, photography, technology and lace-making groups.

The new library is spacious and inviting, with flexible seating and stunning views.

Kevin Simpson was the Shire of Campaspe Mayor during the construction of the library and is a great library supporter. 'The Shire of Campaspe opted for clever and thoughtful design, while remaining within a conservative budget,' he said. Installing a digital piano for musicians and music students to use is something Simpson is particularly proud of.

Library users said say the library is 'fantastic' and offers the kind of space that is highly valued in regional communities.

Mental space in Melton

Melton Library and Learning Hub has 11 meeting spaces, including an 80-seat auditorium and various intimate spaces for arts, crafts and business groups; a children's area with outdoor sensory garden; chill-out gaming spaces for youth; a recording and editing studio; family history dens; and a café. Melton libraries hosted 750 storytelling, author talks and book-club sessions between 2011 and 2013. In addition to the 200 craft and art classes, 30 family history classes and 20 exhibitions over the same period, the library service held 100 'Dungeons and Dragons' role-playing sessions and 80 'Games Arvo' sessions for online multiplayer gaming.

The focus on mental stimulation and learning permeates Melton's collection and is facilitated by the availability of flexible library spaces. Resource kits for loan have been assembled to support the community's families, carers and people with dementia and ageing-related illnesses. These include:

- activity boxes with themes such as sewing, cooking, fishing, gardening and shed work
- conversation-starter and memory-jogger kits with objects and photos that trigger memories
- baby dolls with associated dressing and caring items
- games and musical instruments
- singing and musical kits.

LIBRARIES INCUBATING CREATIVITY

Victorian public libraries are encouraging and incubating community creativity in many ways, on a scale undreamt of in the libraries of the past. They nurture cultural expression and facilitate imaginative thinking in a variety of modes and forms. They invest energy and resources into encouraging individual and collective creativity, and the kinds of open-ended experimentation that can lead to new ideas, connections and creative output. People described public libraries as a one-stop shop for contact and creativity. Some said they started their creative business in the library. Performing artists said they would like to use the whole library space as a site for a performance about the library, with the library, for the library. They said it would help 'reframe the space', and allow people to experience it differently. 'The potential is huge,' says John Murrell, Chief Executive Officer of West Gippsland Library Corporation. 'We need to be the incubators for the community and help them do what they want to do. We can be the stimulus for creativity, and also a repository.' (67)

EXHIBITION, MEETING AND EVENT SPACES

Library exhibition spaces are being used to support local or emerging artists and performers. Many report increased sales and useful connections emerging from their exposure in public libraries. The availability of musical instruments, such as pianos, has changed the ambience of many public libraries and, if available in digital form with earphones, allow music students to quietly practice while others read nearby. Meeting rooms, storage space for art-making and other materials, and comfortable seating allow craft, reading, theatre, storytelling, animation, graphic novel and literacy groups to meet in a central public place free of charge. Along with an array of literature-related activities and programs (see Lens 6), libraries are increasingly hosting talks and programs that challenge conventional assumptions and stimulate views and ideas about community priorities. Creative fabrication or maker spaces, sometimes containing 3D printers and physical and digital tools, are doing for adults what libraries have always done, and continue to do in ever more inventive ways, for kids. Survey and workshop respondents appreciate the sense of fun, play and joy that the presence of art, sculpture and craft-making can bring to library spaces.

AN OPEN AND EVOLVING SERVICE ETHIC

A new service ethic and skills base is emerging in libraries. The skills needed to help visual artists, performers and writers realise their various creative goals require library staff to move beyond their traditional roles; these new skills are being developed, practised and identified to varying degrees across Victorian library services. The initiative, marketing, promotion, desktop publishing and event management associated with cultural activities requires specific professional priorities, qualities and skills. The field research indicates that this is an under-researched and scantily resourced professional arena in many Victorian libraries.

FLEXIBLE AND CREATIVE COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

As well as traditional library resources, public library collections in Victoria include:

- musical instruments
- activity boxes for crafts
- memory recording and photography resources
- artworks owned by the library, and art collections for loan
- special bequest materials
- a taxidermy collection of local animals
- maps
- digitised photographs, newspapers and ephemera
- puppets
- pedometers and Power-Mates
- board games
- digital gaming resources and interactive games
- art on panels, windows and walls
- sculptures and public artworks inside or near the library.

These collections represent important cultural assets; they bring attention to local creative talent, and encourage participation in a range of creative pursuits.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND CREATIVE PRODUCTION

Many people use public libraries as sites for creative production. In the survey, 436 respondents said they used a public library for this purpose. They identified themselves as writers, graphic novelists, artists, academics, students, illustrators, animators, performers, poets, craftspeople, knitters, cake decorators and fashion designers.

Asked how the library could facilitate their creative work and help them be more productive, they responded most frequently that provision of a quiet space was important. This was described variously as:

• 'an office away from home'
• 'a place apart from domestic responsibilities and kids'
• 'a contemplative space'
• 'a reprieve from busyness'
• 'a place of concentration, inspiration, colour and movement'.

Many survey and workshop respondents lamented the loss or reduction of quiet spaces in contemporary libraries. Suggestions for remedying this situation included designing purpose-built library spaces, restoring quiet zones, enforcing quiet zones, and having dedicated spaces or studios for creative workers.

Suggestions for improving support for creative producers included:

• specialist equipment such as 3D printers, light tables, large tables
• specialist books, magazines and online reference materials on craft, art, music and performance
• pencils, crayons, scrap paper, floor space and software programs
• workshops
• better WiFi
• activities and lectures
• better interiors and soft furnishings
• more booth, studio, digital fabrication and small meeting spaces.

Music makers

Music making in the Casey-Cardinia libraries of Pakenham, Narre Warren and Hampton Park excites regular library users and introduces new people to what's possible in today's public library spaces. Sunday afternoon musical events have been held in Narre Warren Library six times a year for the last decade. Their popularity led to a broader musical program now offered in Pakenham and Hampton Park libraries, which is sponsored by their Friends group. New library buildings, flexible interiors and the introduction of Sunday opening times have been enabling factors. Local performers, many of whom are professional jazz, folk and classical musicians, represent about 20 per cent of the program. The program brings free cultural events to an emergent community currently lacking the cultural venues to match its rapid population growth.

There are two main audiences: library users for whom the events are like aural wallpaper, making their visit brighter and more intense; and those who come specifically to hear acoustic guitar, cello, flute, banjo, didgeridoo and ukulele, and all kinds of singing from gypsy to folk. Users and visitors experience the library as an inclusive performance space where music can be enjoyed and where music can also be made via the occasional ukulele or fiddle workshop.

Warm up Woodend

The Friends of Fibre knitting group at Woodend first met in the library in April 2013. By July, they had draped the library in multi-coloured yarn as part of the Woodend Winter Wonderland Festival.

The community art project had people queuing at the doors to get in and doubled the number of library visitors. Hundreds of new people came into Woodend's Library and Shire Customer Service Centre as a result of the art project. Many commented on the joy, warmth, fun and great atmosphere it generated in the town.

The Winter Wonderland Festival was a collaborative endeavour. Library volunteers helped with displays and craft design, collected donated items and worked for weeks on end to join knitted pieces for the final yarn-bombing exercise. The library's craft and art collections were showcased, new relationships forged with community arts organisations and local businesses; schools were also invited to participate, and yarn-bombed pets were welcome. Librarians Lulu Cockram and Susie Prestney say the project facilitated creative collaboration and social interaction across the community.

'The great thing about street art is discovering the unexpected,' said librarian Lulu Cockram. 'And the beauty of yarn-bombing is that it's temporary. It can easily be removed with no damage to the area. The thrill of unexpected colour and warmth puts a smile on people's faces, especially in winter.'

Loud@theLibrary

Swan Hill Library's biannual Loud@theLibrary is a musical performance event for young people. On performance night, shelving is removed and the library becomes a concert arena. A local secondary college lends staging equipment. A local music shop owner volunteers his expertise, along with $50,000 of equipment. The local sound and lighting business offers lighting equipment for a token fee. Initially, the performers' families and friends were the only guests. Now it has a reputation as an exciting night out. There is a calendar of events and bands are approaching the library asking to play.

Building relationships with young people has been critical in changing perceptions and building momentum, and social media has been instrumental in doing this. Conversations with library staff are no longer just about books and research: they now have a technical dimension. How many microphones will be needed? What sort of staging equipment will be available? Can six or eight people be comfortably fitted on stage? These conversations generate high interest for young people, and have helped them interact with the library in new ways.

One young performer went on to release a single on the ABC's Triple J Unearthed, which later became a YouTube hit. His musical achievements were encouraged and supported by Loud@theLibrary.

Library longevity

Yarra Libraries' Richmond branch was an early creative library hub. It was influenced in the 1970s by a trend that emphasised inclusiveness and community creativity. The library had community arts workers, a theatrette (refurbished in 2013), and a photography darkroom, print room and video editing suite. Audio visual and lighting equipment and an array of creative production tools were available for loan. English as a Second Language and literacy classes are still available on-site, supported by the Centre for Adult Education.

The library has housed the Women's Art Register since 1978. The collection is still going strong today, and includes a comprehensive collection of women's art and reference documentation for on-site viewing and circulation. The focus has been on female artists, ensuring the artworks and appropriate bibliographic records are captured and used as a resource in the community.

The Richmond Library is still a creative hive of activity. A number of survey respondents specifically mentioned Richmond Library, saying they were happy their council rates supported such an important community resource.

A butterfly's wing

Yarra Plenty Regional Library has extended its community engagement to include community art projects. Library extensions and refurbishments have provided a canvas for experimentation. An artist worked with the stories and experiences of Thomastown residents to create public art pieces that are now on display in the library and its courtyard.

Watsonia Library's new community meeting room was launched with a three-dimensional multimedia artwork celebrating aquatic imagination. Called Unrestricted Under the Sea, the piece emerged as a partnership between Banyule City Council, Yarra Plenty Library Service and Neami National. (Neami National is an organisation that provides mental health rehabilitation and support services.) Now on permanent display, the artwork has transformed the appearance of the library and become a treasured community artwork.

Watsonia Library invited people with an intellectual disability to complete this sentence: 'The library as a place of ...'. The Diamond Valley Arts Theatre Company then turned those perspectives into a special performance project, adding lighting and sound to bring participants' stories to life, and helping change perceptions of how library spaces can be seen and experienced.

Local artists at Lalor Library designed a collection of mosaic butterflies emerging from a book. They then taught a Neami National group how to create the mosaics. Lalor Library has acquired the butterfly artworks for permanent display.

From manga to mindfulness

How do you bring a diverse community into a new future without straining existing opportunity gaps and community divisions? Identifying community challenges and helping people to solve them is something libraries can help facilitate, says Geelong Regional Library's Patti Manolis. Libraries are a medium for participation – and are therefore potential change agents in their communities.

In the Geelong region – from Corio to Waurn Ponds, Bannockburn to Belmont – 16 branch libraries act as entry points to different modes of creative thinking, doing and sharing:

- The Open Mind Lecture Series tackles sustainability, mental health, Indigenous botanical knowledge and the power of music.
- Cross-institutional resource-sharing supports students researching topics – for example, World War I – from visual, performing arts and word-based perspectives across all library, gallery and museum platforms.
- Partnerships with agencies such as Diversitat support the Pako Festa and other vibrant cultural festivals.
- Regular manga and gaming clubs combine talk, drawing and animation.
- Words, stories, graphic novels and movies are interwoven into Chatterbooks, Toddler Time, Pop Fiction and Readers Rendezvous.
- Food of the World consolidates the library's role as a crossroads for intercultural exchange.

Equality of access is critical, Manolis explains, and the emphasis is on bringing collections alive in new ways and formats, using technology to stimulate creativity, and creating access through art, music, performance and ideas.

Art in libraries

Bayside Library Service gives local artists the opportunity to exhibit work in a library. Through an acquisitive art prize worth $1000, winning artworks are permanently acquired for library spaces. Frankston City Library's art for Loan program loans artwork created and owned by local artists. There are currently 89 artworks in circulation.

Hume Library Service makes the George Evans Museum's artefacts and photographic collection available in its Sunbury Library. The Fitzroy Library has on display a number of paintings on loan from the City of Yarra's Art collection, while the Richmond Library supports and circulates the Women's Art Register Collection.

LIBRARIES AS CULTURAL CONNECTORS

In communities across Victoria, public libraries are excellent cultural connectors. Data from the study shows that Victoria's public libraries are networked information hubs, connecting and disseminating global knowledge. Library managers and staffs are skilled at making connections across different cultural activities, entities and institutions – and also between library clients.

Libraries also connect laterally across regions and council jurisdictions, learning from each other's experiences, ideas, programs, services and cultural development plans. The public library is a connecting space and place; it provides a valuable cultural service in community cohesion and identity, and acts as a community 'holding space' (21) in times of difficulty. Research participants described public libraries as:

- 'the first port of call when you move to a new town'
- 'a resource with internet, WiFi, computers, newspapers, books, DVDs, etc. when you are unemployed, retired, need to meet friends, do things together, get out of home, to study, to plan, to research, to chill out'
- 'a place where you can come and feel connected'.

The library is a vital cultural connector in regional towns with few other public facilities; it is a resourceful partner for local art shows, performing arts groups, craft groups and book fairs.

Libraries connect people with art, literature, ideas and many forms of creativity. They forge cultural links across precincts, communities and regions, and with other culture-making organisations and individuals. Regional arts coordinators are often based in libraries because of their central locations, high visitation rates, diverse clientele and extended opening hours (53, 56). Libraries themselves are working on multicultural and arts events and festivals. They are taking collections and programs to schools, retirement homes, community halls, farms, parks and shopping centres. Some libraries are working more closely with other cultural institutions, such as museums and galleries, on joint initiatives, sharing digital platforms and expertise, and working together on cultural planning committees. Research for *Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* showed that many libraries are keen to further extend their role and services into community cultural partnerships.

Passing through

Every summer, 70,000 holidaymakers visit the Bass Coast and South Gippsland regions of Victoria. There are backpackers, grey nomads, international tourists, and people who live in Melbourne but holiday in Wonthaggi, Inverloch, Foster or Cowes. Thousands of visitors use the local public library to borrow fiction, use the internet, access WiFi, read newspapers and magazines, talk to friends or hang out during bad weather. A small library like Inverloch can be overwhelmed in summer, with an average of 600 people coming through the doors each day. Naturally, library workers like to take leave during the summer too, so allocating resources across the regional library service to meet the seasonal surge can be challenging.

Regional libraries host a range of storytelling and literary events. Some events take place in the library, while others happen on the beach. Whether resident or visitor, with kids or without, the library's cultural activities are a source of stimulation and diversion.

Fluid library walls

Creating permeable walls between the physical library building and the extended community is essential in diverse, complex communities, argues Margherita Barbante, Library Service Manager of Yarra Libraries. The Moon Festival was a partnership between Yarra Libraries and a community group; it involved a range of people from the community – not exclusively Chinese or Vietnamese – from different age groups. Part of the festival dragon, which later appeared in the street celebrations, was made in the library.

'Stepping outside our library facilities to engage with different community groups is important in a community like ours,' Barbante says. 'We build new conversations in the community, and find that we can actually bring people back to the library to experience other activities. The provision of books is the passive part of what we do. We're trying to be a bit more dynamic though, stepping outside the sphere of what we are used to.'

Box office

Stawell Library provides space and specialised input for an active local history group, book talks and book chats. It also acts as a de facto box office for the local performing arts society, handling ticket sales and advertising its programs.

100 Frames

The 2011 flood in northern Victoria devastated towns and farmlands across the Gannawarra and Campaspe shires. After the floods, Gannawarra Library Service reviewed its historical collection for photos of the 1908 and 1916 floods. While the photos could be dated, the people and the flooded buildings in the photos could not been identified. Determined to create an accurate record of the 2011 flood, the library established the 100 Frames project. People were invited to submit photos taken with mobile phones or professional cameras. There was one prerequisite: entrants had to state who was in the photo and where the house or farm was located. Nearly 6000 photos were submitted.

A committee pared the photos down to 100. Those 100 photos became a travelling exhibition, circulating throughout the shire and starting conversations at community-run events in Kerang, Cohuna, Murrabit and Benjeroop. 100 Frames has developed a life of its own, with the exhibition travelling through Victoria and New South Wales. The library also catalogued over 5000 of the photos that were originally submitted, keeping 1500 in its permanent collection. Its success has surprised everyone.

Over 100 homes were lost during the 2011 flood. The library set up a fund for the library books they assumed would be lost or damaged. Only three books were lost; when people were evacuated, they took their library books with them.

Noah's Ark

When Noah first came to story-time at Foster Library in West Gippsland, he had just learned to crawl. Like many new toddlers, Noah didn't want to stay in the children's area of the library. During walking story-time, he would often be found crawling out of the library.

Noah's mother was new to the town and afraid Noah's behaviour was disruptive. Librarian Margaret Haycroft assured her that Noah would eventually find his own way to join in. One day, Noah crawled up to a toy box, took all the toys out, hopped in, and listened to story-time as if for the first time. Noah had found his safe place in the library. His mother could then relax and get to know her neighbours.

Noah doesn't need his box now; he's happy to sit with his mother on a chair. The box was a transitional space that Noah created himself. And the library itself was a transitional space for Noah and his mother as they both settled into a new community. 'It's been a real success story all round,' says Margaret Haycroft.

LIBRARIES SUPPORTING AUSTRALIA'S COMPLEX CULTURAL MOSAIC

Victoria's public libraries have responded in a variety of ways to maintain and nurture Australia's diverse, multicultural society. Libraries promote and support diverse narratives, identities and heritage for a variety of community groups. Public libraries:

- curate Indigenous collections and host Indigenous storytelling
- welcome new arrivals to Australia, providing orientation information in English and a range of other languages
- curate and disseminate Languages other than English (LOTE) collections and participate in multicultural festivals
- provide meeting spaces for community, local history and heritage groups
- actively pursue a working philosophy of harmony and social and cultural cohesion
- support LOTE storytelling events and employ librarians from different cultures
- host literacy and digital literacy classes
- distribute vital community information in supportive and friendly ways
- incorporate Harmony Days, and Moon, Holi, Diwali and Ramadan festivals into their cultural programming
- host culturally diverse cooking, food and arts festivals.

Many of these initiatives attract large audiences, sometimes in the thousands. The role libraries play in supporting Australia's complex cultural mosaic is highly valued by community members. It can be seen as part of a positive system of reinforcement, cultivating community resilience, tolerance and appreciation of difference (51, 61). Libraries act as 'low-intensity' meeting places (1, 2, 5), and facilitate cross-cultural understanding in overt ways (as outlined here in the bullet points), and in implicit ways. Many people described the library as a social equaliser, as a culturally enriching experience, and as a generous and inclusive place.

While some respondents believed that their own library service could be more innovative and proactive, the work public libraries are doing to bring complex cultural stories and aspirations to new audiences is highly regarded. Online survey respondents and workshop participants expressed strong views about libraries incorporating the stories of local Aboriginal and multicultural communities into their cultural activities, learning programs and collections.

Some respondents believed that although libraries were culturally engaging with infants, young families and older people from diverse cultures, more could be done to support young adults in this area. Many library services have experimented with new ways to interact with and support the creative ambitions of young people. These activities have involved tapping into the intrinsic interests of this age group though music, dance, theatre, multimedia storytelling and visual arts.

Hip-hop and hope in Fitzroy

Yarra Libraries are supporting cultural diversity in local communities through activities related to food, music, dance, art and author talks. A partnership between the Fitzroy housing estate, City of Yarra Youth Services and the library's youth services team used hip-hop music as a way of developing creative skills. The project culminated in a community performance aimed at the African migrants and refugees from the Fitzroy housing estate. The well-attended event was a huge confidence-builder for kids who had never done any public presentation or performance before.

Manga magic

Low participation rates in youth-oriented book clubs spurred Jessica Broom, Casey-Cardinia's youth librarian, to look for new ways to connect young people with storytelling. Broom noticed a growing interest in the library's manga and graphic novel collections, and was intrigued to hear about the success of Geelong Regional Library Corporation's manga events.

Originating in Japan, manga comics use graphics to tell complex stories that appeal to all age groups. They are increasingly popular with both girls and boys.

The Casey-Cardinia Manga Club started in early 2014 and meets at the Endeavour Hills Library on a monthly basis. Around 30 young people now come to the sessions, some travelling from as far as Pakenham. Some just love to discuss manga, while others are keen to hear guest speakers and take part in drawing workshops to develop their own manga style and stories. 'They are the experts,' said Broom. 'I just provide the space and a bit of guidance.'

Local manga artists were invited to exhibit their work in the 2014 Winter Arts Festival in Berwick; other events celebrating Japanese culture, such as a sushi workshop, have created interest in different cultural traditions. Broom is using the pilot to build the base for a Youth Advisory Group, which will help develop the library's graphic novel collection and create new programs for young people in the Casey-Cardinia region. The Manga Club has shown Broom how a greater sense of participation and belonging can stimulate creativity in young people who have found the right medium in which to express it.

Harmony day

The Harmony Day committee at Swan Hill has 35 community members, including Aboriginal people, Pacific Islanders and Africans. The first Harmony Day in 2010 attracted over 1500 people, predominantly migrants and refugees. The following year, it attracted 3000 people. It now draws a crowd from outside Swan Hill, with nearby Robinvale also involved and people coming from Adelaide, Canberra and Melbourne. Harmony Day is a community-run event. Community meetings are held at the library after hours, and the library is where people come between meetings. New immigrants perceive the library as a non-threatening place.

Cultural partnerships

The City of Maribyrnong's 74,000 residents represent over 80 language groups and have 135 different countries of origin. Vietnamese, Indian, Chinese, Italian, Sri Lankan, Burmese, Sudanese, Ethiopian and Bangladeshi are among the cultural and language groups represented. The library service has significant community language collections, and provides English language tuition and mentoring via Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) and Yarraville Community Centre. It sponsors cultural festivals and events that attract record crowds.

The West Footscray branch library is co-located with the Neighbourhood House. Together, they hold regular community markets and run an event to celebrate the Indian Holi festival every March. The street is closed off and the traders set up food stalls. As a result, many Indian residents now use the library, Indian children come to story-time, and the library has built a significant Hindi collection.

LIBRARIES NURTURING THE CULTURE OF THE WRITTEN AND SPOKEN WORD

Survey data gathered for this report shows that in the two years from 2011 to 2013, Victorian public libraries facilitated an estimated 41,257 story and rhyme-time sessions and 1890 author talks. They participated in numerous literary festivals, conducted 8175 literacy classes, coordinated 6203 book-reading and discussion groups for adults, and hosted 1391 public lectures. These literacy and literary-based activities are much loved by users, and cross age, gender and cultural barriers.

The culture of the written word and the value of the book as a material cultural artefact was mentioned by research respondents as something they did not want to see lost in the face of digital technology and the multipurpose library. Many library users value the 'joy of browsing bookshelves' and 'serendipitous discovery'. When asked about libraries, the words most frequently used by survey respondents were 'book' and 'reading'.

Research respondents commented that libraries are often the first childhood cultural experience people have outside home or school. Literature, books, words and libraries go hand in hand for many research respondents, and many described exposure to books and reading at an early age as 'essential'.

Through rhyme-time, story-time and exposure to storytelling events of all kinds, young people are drawn into a world of imagination, language and culture via their library. Boroondara Library, Arts and Culture Manager Jenny Ruffy explains the importance of this early exposure to the written and spoken word. 'There's no alternative for story-time and the socialising experience that you get from being there. There may be 80 people seated in a small space and they are from every demographic, every ethnicity and every age; there are parents, grandparents, carers and nannies; there's a whole spectrum there – and you can't buy that experience for children. If you want to talk about the creation of community, that's where and how it starts.'

Contemporary storytelling in public libraries is a dynamic process. Whether in Horsham, Glen Waverley, Warracknabeal, Warragul, Footscray, Camberwell or Echuca, these sessions are rich multimedia events, involving dance, music, singing, craft and creating art. They encourage self-directed learning and play. They are three-dimensional, with dinosaurs loping across the floor and jungle animals leaping out of imaginary trees. They are the perfect amalgam of visual, word-based and aural arts woven together in unique ways, depending on place, space and community demographics.

In terms of literary activities, city locations have rich offerings available. However, the work libraries do in this sphere is especially significant in country areas. With fewer cultural events on offer, literary events are considered to be vitally important for regional communities. Author talks, poetry slams, public lectures, reading groups, and the development of literary and nonfiction collections are highly valued. Indigenous storytelling cultures are also highly valued. In workshops, and in survey responses from library users and staff, connecting with Indigenous cultures through storytelling was a recurrent theme. People want libraries to play a greater role in this sphere, and library staff members are keen to do more.

Many library managers and staff were passionate about the importance of giving the literary arts a stronger place at the cultural planning table. Books and words, they argued, are fundamental to communication and the expression of ideas and complex feelings. Recent research (9) in the field of neuroscience confirms the importance of books and reading, suggesting that the activity of reading, and reading fiction in particular, improves brain functionality and cultivates empathy.

Writer Neil Gaiman, a committed library user, describing the importance of word-based culture, sums up the sentiment expressed by library users and staff: 'Reading is the key... words are more important than they ever were: we navigate the world with words, and as the world slips onto the web, we need to follow, to communicate and to comprehend what we are reading. People who cannot understand each other cannot exchange ideas, cannot communicate, and translation programs only go so far.' (19)

Word It Up in Boroondara

A regular event at Boroondara Library Service is BookTalk, where a staff member shares a favourite book with a group of ten or more people.

The Word It Up: Boroondara Literary Awards highlight the library's role as a centre for literature. In partnership with the Rotary Club of Balwyn, the awards have been running for 16 years. The open short story competition attracts over 1000 entries. There are prizes for young writers and poets within Boroondara, and a national open short story competition for adult writers. Each year's winning entries are collated in an anthology.

All linked up

Close relationships between cultural institutions at Monash City Council support an interdisciplinary approach to cultural programming. Sharing a Wheelers Hill location helped boost the relationship between the library and the Monash Art Gallery, leading to a complementary partnership between literary and visual arts. Sometimes when the gallery holds an exhibition, the library will host related author talks and compile reading lists.

At Clayton Community Centre – where the 14 services include a swimming pool, health centre, pre-school, library, theatre and an arts space – the library has initiated storytelling precincts, poetry slams, author talks and writers-in-residence. Oakleigh's annual music festival, the Clayton Street Festival, and the Chinese New Year and Lantern Festival all have a library-related dimension – as a meeting space for planning, as an auditorium and exhibition space, as an information stall, and as a site for storytelling in community languages ranging from Mandarin to Urdu to Greek. The cultural and events area of the council will also build in 'The Human Library' concept to some of its high-profile events, such as the Oakleigh Music Festival and the NAIDOC week program.

Monash City's WordFest is the cultural highlight, linking library, gallery and museum in a literature-led program featuring short story competitions and well-attended author talks focused on advocacy projects such as gender equality, and projects supporting human rights and anti-racism.

Panoply of poets

The Australian Poetry Slam is a fantastic opportunity for young people, emerging writers, poets and culture lovers to connect with the performed spoken word or to discover its power for the first time. The Victorian heats and state final are coordinated by the State Library of Victoria. In 2013, seven heats were hosted by Craigieburn, Daylesford, Doncaster, Richmond, Echuca and Werribee libraries and the State Library of Victoria. The State Library also hosted the state final, with 346 people attending.

The Poetry Slam has many cultural benefits, especially for regional and rural communities. The Poetry Slam:

- invites participation in regions where spoken-word events are rare
- exposes people to the versatility of language
- gives confidence to people who are drawn to poetry as a means of self-expression.

Community and arts-based partnerships are also strengthened. Australian Poetry, Slamalamadingdong, Melbourne Spoken Word and Multicultural Arts Victoria work with libraries to cross-promote events, particularly through social media.

Melbourne comedian Simon Taylor travelled throughout Victoria to MC the poetry slam heats. He coined the term 'panoply of poets' to describe the rich and diverse poetry on offer. 'I watched seniors recite love poems and teens rap protests,' he said. 'I giggled at puns, marvelled at wit and felt goosebumps ripple across my skin as words carried emotional stories. In the three years I've attended these slams, I've observed the poetry scene grow in popularity and originality. It was inspiring to trek as far as Echuca and as close as Richmond to get a slice of an expanding poetry slam movement.'

Words by the Bay

Words by the Bay is a year-long program of literary workshops, author talks, debates and poetry readings coordinated by Bayside Library Service. The series began in February 2014, with the aim of involving everyone in the municipality in a celebration of words and creative expression. It builds on eight years' experience presenting a more traditional literary festival format. Events take place in Beaumaris, Brighton and Sandringham libraries, the local Arts and Culture Centre, and historic properties such as Black Rock House.

Partnerships underpin Words by the Bay. The University of the Third Age participates in the program, as do local history, writing, drama and poetry groups. Writing and poetry workshops are offered throughout the program, along with book launches, theatre performance, poetry readings and immersive, history-related walking tours.

Well-known writers, thinkers, historians, comedians and artists tackle everything from how to produce a coffee-table photography book to decoding James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The Bayside Writing Competition invites adult writers, students and local poets to compete for literature prizes ranging from adult prose to poetry to 150-word flash fiction.

Being stretched

St Arnaud Library, like many others across Victoria, hosts book chats and reading groups, but it is the literary events that bring people out and give the community a shared cultural experience. Branch librarian Marion Watts says that author events are special for country people because they get to see and hear an author, which enriches their literary experience. Touring programs such as Writers on the Road and High Road to Reading in partnership with the State Library of Victoria, and performers who specialise in the literary works of Jane Austen, for example, are highly valued in country towns.

A bit of controversy is also welcome, as Marion explains: 'We had Catherine Deveny here earlier this year. She's a controversial figure and there had been something in the news about her at the time, so we were concerned that our patrons might not appreciate her. While people didn't agree with everything she said, they enjoyed the visit. They said afterwards that it didn't hurt to be challenged in how they think about things. They enjoyed being stretched. This is something you would never see in a country town if it weren't for the connection with libraries. These things wouldn't happen unless the library could generate and sponsor them.'

Beaming down the centuries

A love of Shakespeare keeps a dedicated group of seniors feeling young at Warracknabeal Library. John, a retired teacher, was asked to run a few poetry sessions during the National Year of Reading in 2012. After a session on Shakespeare's sonnets, a dedicated group formed and agreed to move on to the plays. They spent six months on Hamlet alone. John, Rhonda, Rob and Esme agree that the library is a perfect place in which to meet.

'My interest goes back to school,' says Rhonda. 'I was interested in Shakespeare but didn't really understand it. John has brought it alive for me. We never tire of it and can't wait to come back next week for more.'

Concentration and persistence are required. 'I wouldn't do it on my own,' Rhonda remarks. 'You read two lines and go back over them again and again; it's slow going but wonderful. At the end of the session, we're all exhausted but looking forward to next week. There aren't many things that you can get this much out of. But this is something you look forward to all the time.'

'We all have different viewpoints,' notes Rob. 'I wasn't going to come to these sessions on King Lear. I googled it, and to me it was just a mishmash of human relationships gone wrong. I came along and when John started discussing it, a light came on for me about King Lear. Shakespeare is a mystery man, and that's one of the good things about him. His plays are full of mystery, and without mystery then life isn't much at all. It's a wonderful world, this microcosm of humanity called William Shakespeare, which is still beaming down the centuries to us right here in Warracknabeal.'

The reading chair

Maribyrnong Library Service held its first major literary festival in 2012. Festival events attracted large audiences. A local sculptor was commissioned to construct a giant Reading Chair, with its installation coinciding with the festival launch. The Reading Chair is situated at the heart of a natural amphitheatre in the grounds of Footscray Community Arts Centre. It looks out on the Maribyrnong River and the industrial landscape around it, and symbolises the importance of imagination and storytelling.
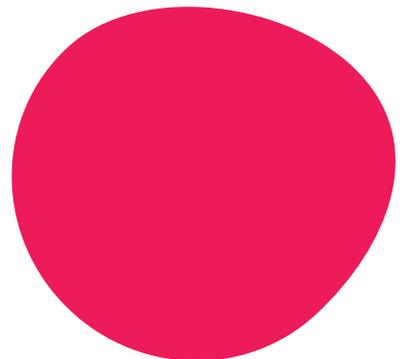
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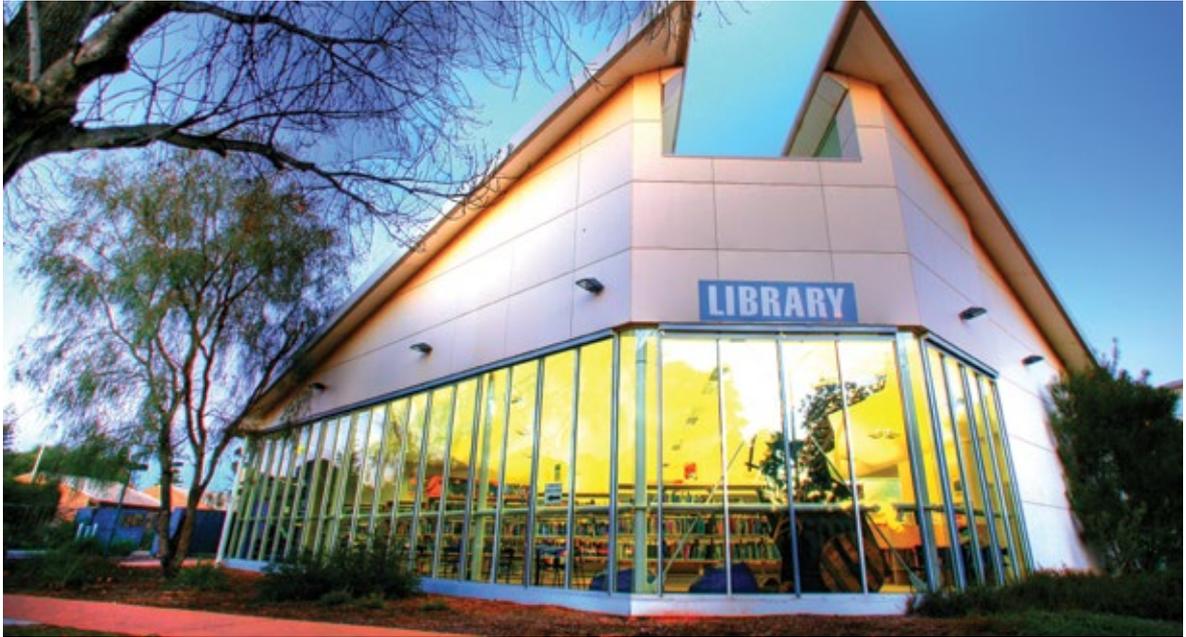
The evidence captured in *Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* shows a cultural landscape in which public libraries are key players. This report shows that public libraries are appropriately seen as 'culture-making social entities'. They represent a set of community values in action, and serve to support and strengthen these values in unique ways. Additionally, the contemporary public library engages in a variety of explicitly arts and cultural activities.

The study utilised a variety of research activities, including:

- online survey data collection
- interviews with a cross-section of library staff and stakeholders
- workshops and small group discussions
- a survey of selected international research.

The findings suggest that many Victorian public libraries are confident and innovative players in the depth and breadth of their culture-making activities. Within a range of constraints – staff resources, budgets, the limitations of existing library spaces – they are reshaping perceptions about (and uses of) libraries in specifically cultural ways.

A consistent view across all research activities was that the cultural activities taking place in public libraries could be further developed, and more widely promoted and shared. The following propositions are designed to support the strategic thinking underway in Public Libraries Victoria Network by presenting ideas relating to issues of cultural potential, and barriers, identified in the study.
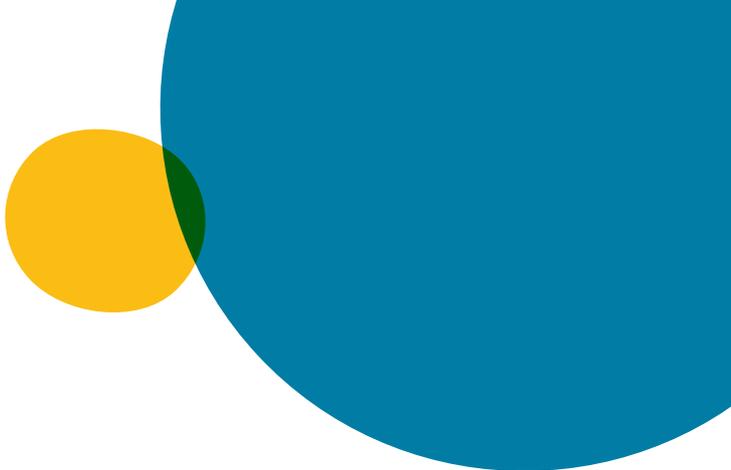
PROPOSITIONS FOR THE FUTURE: SIX LENSES

The Findings section presented the Six Lenses framework through which cultural benefits can be understood. To recap, those lenses are:

- **Lens 1: Libraries as public places of cultural meaning and significance** – Creating focal points for local identity, security and sustainability; local, regional and urban place-making and precinct building
- **Lens 2: The culture of library spaces** – Experimenting and innovating with library space; optimising space in a material, psychological and creative sense
- **Lens 3: Libraries incubating creativity** – Facilitating the production of creative content; supporting, disseminating and showcasing multi-faceted creative endeavour
- **Lens 4: Libraries as cultural connectors** – Linking up; sharing resources; seeding community-driven cultural activities; undertaking various forms of outreach
- **Lens 5: Libraries supporting Australia's complex cultural mosaic** – Interweaving different cultural groups; celebrating and nurturing diversity; stimulating cross-cultural conversation and understanding
- **Lens 6: Libraries nurturing the culture of the written and spoken word** – Reading, literacy, storytelling, writing, critiquing and discussing ideas in written and spoken form

The propositions for each lens are detailed below.

LENS 1: LIBRARIES AS PUBLIC PLACES OF CULTURAL MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE

The energy and vision of library managers, staff and local government authorities who have lobbied for and implemented new and refurbished place and space projects provides a model for others to investigate and take inspiration from.

Library managers and supporters have encouraged funders, in the form of councillors and council staff, to visit libraries in Victoria, other Australian states, and other parts of the world, to study contemporary libraries and meet their counterparts in these locations. These field trips have given library stakeholders a deeper appreciation of – and confidence in – the positive benefits a new library will bring to their communities and proposed cultural precincts.

This accumulated knowledge is intellectual capital that could be formalised and shared. Identifying the success factors involved would help towards building network-wide advocacy skills in activating communities, building stakeholder support, working with other cultural institutions and groups on joint-precinct building plans, and co-designing library spaces with architects and designers.

LENS 2: THE CULTURE OF LIBRARY SPACES

Innovative and up-to-date space design is critical if public libraries are to build on and extend their role as cultural and creative hubs. Public libraries are performing well across the six cultural lenses presented, but future developments will only succeed if the right design approach is pursued, allowing balanced use of space. This involves looking at aspects such as:

- the physical building and its interiors
- the flexibility of spaces and how they can accommodate multiple needs and uses
- the use of contemporary design to create a welcoming and uplifting atmosphere
- awareness of how staff skills and attitudes shape mood, and permit or block creative or cultural expression
- the design of digital interfaces and websites.

Design ambition and aspiration is important. In every case in the research where a library design was controversial, the finished building reshaped people's perceptions of the library in positive ways. Aspiration involves aesthetics. It involves taking advantage of technological enhancements, new textiles, furnishings and building materials, as well as providing leadership in environmental sustainability practices. Having utilitarian and functional library spaces should not mean a lack of pleasing aesthetics; this was a very important consideration for the survey respondents.

Library staffs and users generally have a sophisticated understanding of what contemporary library spaces, both physical and digital, should look and feel like. The State Library of New South Wales publication *People Places: A Guide for Public Library Buildings in New South Wales* (40), is well regarded and often used by library managers in Victoria when new buildings or refurbishments are considered. Serving multiple needs through good design will enhance the library's cultural role and allow it to partner with other cultural providers in new and varied ways.

Crafting the usability and visual friendliness of digital spaces and interfaces is equally important. Young people commented on the limitations of many library interfaces. They want and expect friendly, contemporary digital interfaces that are built with sound usability and design principles.

## LENS 3: LIBRARIES INCUBATING CREATIVITY

Creative incubation takes numerous forms. It involves supporting creative producers and stimulating creative imagination through a range of cultural programs, activities and collections. The availability of multipurpose library spaces has been discussed earlier. Continuing library engagement in community-wide cultural activities is critical, as is seeking representation on a range of community and cultural development reference groups. Active engagement with other cultural institutions and agencies could boost current activities that have not previously been recognised as specifically cultural. Greater recognition, clarity and confidence about libraries' cultural role could lead to increased funding for cultural activities, and access to funding streams that currently are not widely accessed by libraries.

Public libraries should be eligible for arts funding of all kinds, because they are active in all arts domains:

- visual and performing arts
- literary culture
- new media
- digital technology
- Indigenous and multicultural arts-related activities and events.

Additional funding can help to pay artists and specialist staff to enhance the cultural role of libraries, particularly in rural areas. *Victorian Public Libraries 2030* (43) clearly articulates what is needed to enlarge the creative library scenario. Skills are needed in facilitating content creation, supporting arts studios and collaborative work spaces, and understanding and applying insights from brain science. These skills already exist within public libraries but have been overshadowed by a focus on what are currently seen as core library competencies. If Victorian public libraries want to continue to expand their role as creative incubators, these cultural skill sets need to be made explicit and actively fostered.

Offering creative possibilities for library users involves investment. Along with developing internal skills and recruiting specialist staff, funds are needed for equipment, software, artist fees and furniture. These are costly items, especially in regional areas. Many workshop participants in *Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* were aware of their library's financial constraints and the breadth of services already provided with limited funding. Some respondents were comfortable with paying a small fee for cultural events, and were open to the idea of their library undertaking some fee-for-service activities, provided this could be done without compromising the public-access philosophy that users and staff are both united about.
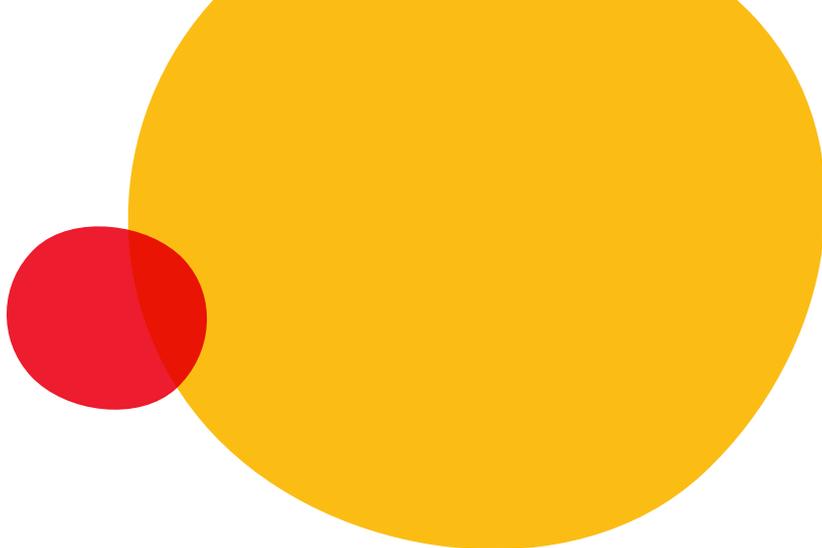
LENS 4: LIBRARIES AS CULTURAL CONNECTORS

Victorian public libraries have been able to achieve everything mentioned in this report because of the inclusive service ethic of library management and staff. The skills and ethos of library personnel contribute significantly to the cultural benefits generated. Workforce planning will be important in advancing the role public libraries can play in the creative/cultural field. Some libraries already recruit people with different skill sets, such as marketing, social media, exhibition design and management, youth work and event management. Many library-trained staff members have also developed these skills.

As mentioned, *Victorian Public Libraries 2030* (43) suggests a range of new and existing skills needed to support the future predicted for public libraries as creative hubs and community gathering places. *Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* confirms the existence of the skills described and gaps still remaining. In particular, *Victorian Public Libraries 2030* suggested that success in the cultural field was correlated with an outreach, partnership-building perspective, and a capacity to collaborate with other cultural institutions, organisations and individuals. At a micro level, the following professional skills will be important in consolidating and expanding the cultural benefits generated by public libraries:

- managing and marketing of cultural events
- contemporary user-friendly design skills, particularly for digital interfaces
- data gathering and evaluation to measure the impact of cultural activities
- promotion of the library's key roles using all kinds of media, especially social media.

The availability of data in social networks and new methods for interpreting it – such as sentiment analysis and behavioural analytics – offers rich insights into social capital and cultural value creation (33). This emerging area is ripe for the data and knowledge-management expertise that librarians already possess. Leadership in this area will have significant benefits for the cultural sector in general, offering a participant-oriented perspective on cultural experiences rather than the measurement frameworks considered by many cultural researchers to be in need of improvement (8, 11, 16).

There are also broader questions about library service skills in the future. These questions relate to how existing library service skills can be understood for their current strengths and extended to include imagination, the freedom to initiate and make decisions within a local context, and to understand the micro skills required for deep community engagement. These skills are noticeably present in many Victorian public libraries. They need to be better understood as part of a discussion about the balance between retaining core library-related skills and competencies, and the new or expanded skills now occupying the periphery of what libraries are doing but which are vital for the creatively engaged library of the future (43).

LENS 5: LIBRARIES SUPPORTING AUSTRALIA'S COMPLEX CULTURAL MOSAIC

Online survey respondents and workshop participants expressed positive views about libraries continuing to include and expand activities based around collecting and spreading stories of local Aboriginal and multicultural communities. While some participants believed their own library service could be more innovative and proactive, the work public libraries are doing to bring complex cultural stories and aspirations to new audiences is highly regarded.

Many library services have experimented with new ways to interact with and support the creative ambitions of young people in culturally diverse communities. These activities have involved tapping into the intrinsic interests of this age group: music, dance, theatre, multimedia storytelling and visual arts.

Artists, performers and writers consulted in this study expressed enthusiasm for the possibilities inherent in public library spaces, collections and connections. Working with individual artists or arts organisations to broker joint activities – including shared funding – is one way libraries can extend this important work. Additional funding will create opportunities to involve a broader range of creative people and groups in programs offered by libraries in culturally diverse communities. Anything and everything is now possible, including:

- cartooning
- digital art and storytelling
- poetry slams
- contemporary art classes and exhibitions
- music tuition, performance and recording
- photography
- dance
- fashion.

LENS 6: LIBRARIES NURTURING THE CULTURE OF THE WRITTEN AND SPOKEN WORD, AND THE RE-VALUING OF LITERARY CULTURE

A significant number of library users emphasised that libraries should maintain their traditional book role – and their valuable established brand as a library – in addition to newer contemporary offerings.

While few believed that libraries were just places for books, the role of libraries in nurturing reading, literature and oral storytelling was strongly emphasised by respondents. For people living in regional areas, or on city fringes, the question of access to these literary cultural offerings was repeatedly raised. Library staff and users, in surveys and workshops, believed that the continued role of locally based public libraries in offering high-quality literary and literacy-related opportunities was essential.

Promoting what is happening, in consistent ways across multiple communication platforms, was seen as critical. Public libraries would benefit from a strategic communications plan that specifies target audiences, key messages and appropriate media in order to build community support for literacy and literary activities, especially among those groups currently unaware of the activities or unable to participate in them.

Areas for building on current successes could include:

- interactive sessions on critical thinking and brain science
- debates on complex topical issues
- 'ideas out loud'
- writing workshops
- locative media projects
- theatre performances using the whole library space.

These areas are in addition to continuing to offer the array of well-received author talks, reading and writing activities, and literary festivals currently on offer in Victorian public libraries across the state.
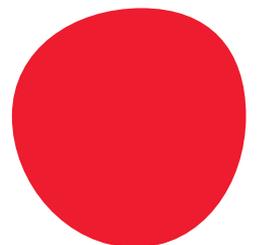
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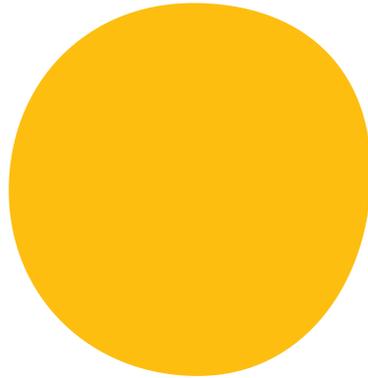
Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries demonstrates that Victoria's public libraries are engaged in a range of cultural activities and processes. These activities are explicitly cultural in the sense of artistic endeavors of various kinds, and are implicitly cultural in the sense that they help animate the cultural life of communities across the state.

Public libraries are culture-making social entities. They represent a set of community-held values, and they act as sites within which these values are tested, internalised, expressed, shared and remixed. Victorian citizens who spend time in, meet at, create and perform in, collaborate with, make decisions to invest in, and work from public libraries across the state, perceive them as richly layered cultural sites. Libraries, the research indicates, contain all the dimensions of cultural experience: potential, promise, relationships, safety, connection, creativity, stimulation and surprise. The study used Six Lenses to understand and describe the specific ways that Victorian public libraries contribute to culture-making and deliver cultural benefits to the communities they serve. The Six Lenses are outlined below:

- Lens 1: Libraries are public places of cultural meaning and significance.

- Lens 2: Libraries provide cultural spaces in which experimentation and innovation can occur.

- Lens 3: Libraries incubate creativity and facilitate creative production and dissemination.

- Lens 4: Libraries are cultural connectors, providing the means by which linkages can be made and resources shared.

- Lens 5: Libraries support Australia's complex cultural mosaic, celebrating diversity and stimulating intercultural exchange.

- Lens 6: Libraries nurture the culture of the written and spoken word, and provide programs and opportunities in which literary culture can be valued.

The Six Lenses are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. For example, providing free and flexible library spaces enables a library to expand its range of cultural programs and opportunities. These offerings then have the potential to attract new audiences. The more people who come to a library, the more opportunities are created for intercultural exchange. Changing perceptions about what's possible in libraries can generate new and varied uses. Different uses can animate the atmosphere and the spaces within the library and extend its role in the cultural life of a city or town. Learning to value a library contributes to a sense of civic responsibility; if you care about something, you want to look after it, and civic responsibility is fundamental to a sense of place, local pride and community resilience.

As *Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* reveals, public libraries are at the frontline of new forms of participatory creativity. This is a new proposition for public libraries, and requires more research. The evidence gathered for this study through interviews and group discussions suggests that participation in culturally rich activities in libraries could have substantial cultural benefits, including:

- claiming space in libraries to learn and produce creative works
- working with others on collective projects
- interacting with the library's collection in new ways.

These benefits are individual and collective: from brain health to new career paths, from social and psychological support to life-long learning and community problem-solving. In other words, these new forms of participatory creativity are fostering the skills, attitudes and values essential to thriving, culturally active communities.

Victorian public libraries, like their counterparts around the world, are responding to changing community needs and expectations with imagination and inventiveness.

This report complements previous research linking public libraries with economic and social benefits. Its findings support the view that public libraries are also significant culture-making entities.
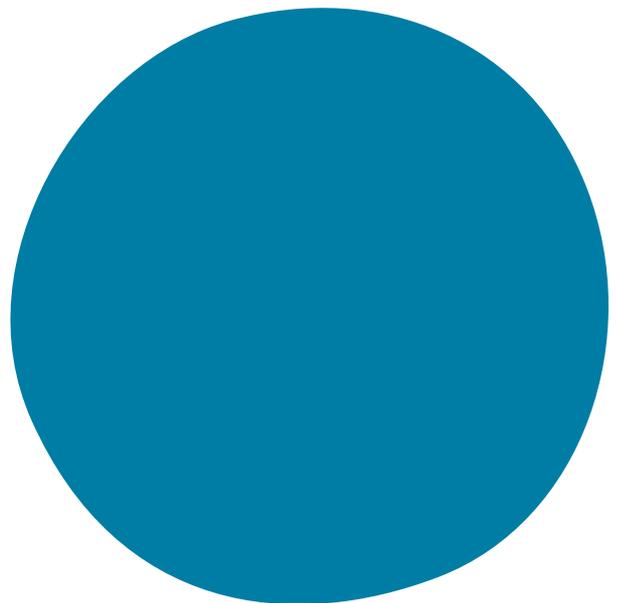
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Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

1. Welcome to the Victorian Public Libraries Cultural Benefits Survey

Over the past few years, the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network have conducted significant research into the economic and social benefits of Victorian public libraries. We now turn our attention to the cultural benefits of public libraries.

The State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network have commissioned Annie Talvé and Dr Sally Gray from Project Sisu to manage this research project.

This survey provides all Victorian public library users with the opportunity to contribute to the project.

We would really appreciate you taking the time to have your say. The survey will take approximately 5–10 minutes to complete. All responses are confidential and the results will be treated as a collective set of data to be merged with the findings from the research project as a whole.

Note: you must be over 15 years old to complete this survey.

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

2. Using my library

1. Off the top of your head, what words come to mind when you think about your public library?

2. On average, how often do you visit or make use of your public library (select one):

- ☐ Every day
- ☐ Once a week
- ☐ Every fortnight or so
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ A few times a year
- ☐ Less than once a year
- ☐ Online only

3. Which of the following library cultural activities have you participated in over the past two years? Tick as many as apply.

- ◯ Author talks
- ◯ Book readings/launches
- ◯ Reading groups
- ◯ Literary festivals
- ◯ Public lectures
- ◯ Art exhibitions/installations
- ◯ Performances – theatre, music, poetry
- ◯ Storytelling/Storytime
- ◯ Literacy classes
- ◯ Digital literacy – using Internet, tablets, databases
- ◯ Cultural heritage/identity events eg Multicultural, Indigenous
- ◯ Using local history resources
- ◯ Contributing digital content eg online book reviews, history wikis, History Pin
- ◯ None

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

4. How satisfied are you with each of the following cultural activities offered by your local library?

	Very unsatisfied	Quite unsatisfied	Quite satisfied	Very satisfied
Author talks	○	○	○	○
Book readings/launches	○	○	○	○
Reading groups	○	○	○	○
Literary festivals	○	○	○	○
Public lectures	○	○	○	○
Art exhibitions/installations	○	○	○	○
Performances - theatre, music, poetry	○	○	○	○
Storytelling/Storytime	○	○	○	○
Literacy classes	○	○	○	○
Digital literacy - using Internet, tablets, databases	○	○	○	○
Availability of local history resources	○	○	○	○
Cultural heritage/identity events eg Multicultural, Indigenous	○	○	○	○
Contributing digital content eg online book reviews, history wikis, History Pin	○	○	○	○

5. Do you have any comments or suggestions about the cultural activities offered by your local library?

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

6. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
My library is the most valuable public asset we have in our community	◯	◯	◯	◯
My library welcomes all members of the community	◯	◯	◯	◯
My library is a well designed community space	◯	◯	◯	◯
My library provides a broad range of cultural activities	◯	◯	◯	◯
There is enough quiet space in my library	◯	◯	◯	◯
My library offers digital/online options for me to engage in cultural activities	◯	◯	◯	◯
My library provides opportunities outside the library building to use collections & resources	◯	◯	◯	◯
My library collaborates with other local groups and institutions to provide cultural activities to our community	◯	◯	◯	◯

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

3. Thinking about public libraries

1. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
It would be great if there were more art and photographic exhibitions at my public library	○	○	○	○
My public library would be enhanced by having more music, theatre or poetry performances	○	○	○	○
It would be good to be able to make things at my public library, such as crafts, woodwork etc.	○	○	○	○
Public libraries should have cafes	○	○	○	○
Public libraries should really just be places for books	○	○	○	○
I think it's good that public libraries have internet and WiFi access	○	○	○	○
I like the idea of having community meetings and other activities in the library	○	○	○	○
It would be great if my library had a multi-media lab for making video, audio or music productions	○	○	○	○

2. What do you think your public library could or should be doing that it's not doing now in terms of providing cultural activities and benefits for your community?

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

3. How satisfied are you with the following library services?

	Very unsatisfied	Quite unsatisfied	Quite satisfied	Very satisfied	N/A
Availability of fiction & non fiction books	○	○	○	○	○
Computer or Internet access	○	○	○	○	○
Online resources accessible from home	○	○	○	○	○
Free WiFi	○	○	○	○	○
Classes	○	○	○	○	○
Storytime	○	○	○	○	○
Local history resources	○	○	○	○	○
Opportunities to contribute to creating content online eg wikis, HistoryPin	○	○	○	○	○
Broad range of digital content eg e-books	○	○	○	○	○
Spaces available for meeting friends	○	○	○	○	○

4. How important is it to you that your library provides:

	Not important	Not very important	Quite important	Very important
Free library services such as books, computer access, WiFi	○	○	○	○
Free cultural activities such as Storytime, author talks, public lectures	○	○	○	○
Easy access by foot or car	○	○	○	○
A good collection of books, DVDs, CDs	○	○	○	○
A welcoming place to hang out	○	○	○	○
Opportunities to participate in online cultural activities	○	○	○	○

5. Do you use a public library for creative production purposes? Examples might include writing, designing online games or animations, drawing, using library spaces for rehearsing performance pieces, craft production etc.

○ Yes

○ No

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

4.

1. How does the library you use help facilitate your creative work? How could the library help you be more productive?

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

5.

1. Do you have any comments or suggestions about the role your public library has in generating cultural benefits for your community?

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

6. Some personal details

1. Where are you based?

City or suburb

Postcode

2. What is your age?

○ 15 to 24

○ 25 to 34

○ 35 to 44

○ 45 to 54

○ 55 to 64

○ Over 65

3. What is your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ Other

4. Do you identify as someone with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background?

○ Yes

○ No

5. What is your country of birth?

6. What is the main language you speak at home?

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

7. Which of the following best describes your work status? You can tick more than one box.

☐ I work full-time

☐ I work part-time

☐ I am self employed

☐ I work on a casual basis

☐ I'm a full-time carer (children/aged parents)

☐ I am retired

☐ I am a student

Other (please specify)
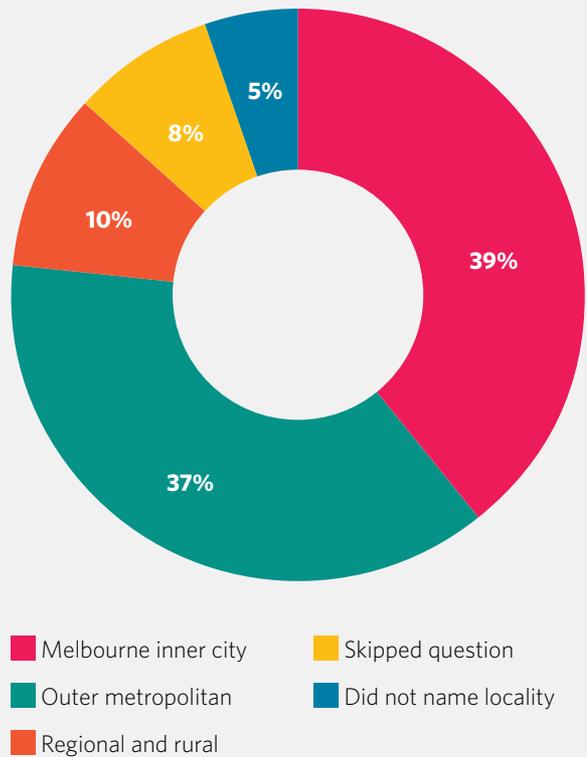
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7. Thank you

Thank you for completing this survey. A comprehensive report of our research findings will be published in May 2014.

LIBRARY USER SURVEY: SNAPSHOT OF RESPONDENTS

- There were 2747 respondents to the online survey.

- Respondents aged between 35 and 54 represented the largest group (44.5%). The age profile ranged from 15 to 65+.

- Responses were received from across the state (see Figure 1), with the largest concentrations in the cities of Yarra and Moreland, followed by Melbourne City, Darebin and the City of Greater Geelong.

- There were 2746 responses to questions about country of birth: 65.0% of respondents were born in Australia; 25.9% were born outside Australia; and 8.8% unspecified. Of the 25.9% born outside Australia, the largest concentrations were from the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, North America, Vietnam, Malaysia, Hong Kong, India and Germany.

- Many respondents spoke more than one language at home. Apart from English, 57 languages were spoken. The primary language groups, in order of frequency, were Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, Greek, Italian, Arabic, Japanese, Tamil and German.

- There were 25 people from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.

- The majority of respondents worked full-time (34.78%). This was followed by part-time workers (23.75%) and retirees (18.79%).

- The average rate of library visitation was once every week/fortnight (60%). About 8% of respondents used their library on a daily basis; only 0.5% made use of their local library's online resources.

- The gender breakdown was 70.65% female; 28.76% male; 0.59% other.

Figure 1: Local government area of 2747 respondents

Legend:
- Melbourne inner city
- Outer metropolitan
- Regional and rural
- Skipped question
- Did not name locality

LIBRARY USER SURVEY: PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

From a prompted list, respondents were asked which library cultural activities they had participated in over the past two years.

- Two-thirds of respondents had participated in some form of cultural activity at their local library in the past two years. More than a quarter (26%) had participated in author talks. Those who participated in author talks were more likely to be female and 45 years of age or older.
- More than a quarter (26%) had attended art exhibitions/installations.
- A fifth (21%) attended storytelling/story-time. These respondents were more likely to be aged 35 to 44.
- A fifth (21%) of respondents had used local historical resources.
- Slightly less than a fifth (19%) of respondents had used the internet at their local library.

- About a fifth (18%) of respondents had attended a public lecture.
- About a fifth (17%) of respondents had attended a book reading or book launch.
- Over a tenth (13%) had attended performance/ theatre/music/poetry.
- Over a tenth (12%) had participated in a literary festival at least once.
- Respondents who had not participated in any cultural activities were more likely to be male and under 34 years of age.

A majority of respondents were in favour of public libraries continuing to expand their cultural offerings, such as photography and visual arts, performing arts, poetry slams, maker spaces, multimedia labs, cafés, meeting rooms, literary events, and so on. Only a minority of respondents (18%, combining 'strongly agree' and 'agree') believed that libraries should just be places for books.

LIBRARY USER SURVEY: PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND CULTURAL BENEFITS

From a prompted list of cultural benefits, respondents were asked how important it is to them that their library provides each cultural benefit. Table 4 lists those activities that were ranked 'quite important' and 'very important' by library users.

Table 4: Importance of cultural activities

IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL ACTIVITIES ('QUITE IMPORTANT' AND 'VERY IMPORTANT')	
Free library services such as books, computer access, WiFi	98.8%
A good collection of DVDs, CDs	98.6%
Easy access by foot or car	96.7%
A welcoming place to hang out	88.1%
Free cultural activities such as story-time, author talks, public lectures	83.5%
Opportunities to participate in online cultural activities	62.0%

- The majority of respondents placed a great deal of importance on a range of cultural benefits in their local public library. Nearly all respondents (99%) felt it was quite important or very important that their library provides free services such as books, computer access and WiFi. Almost all (87%) felt this was very important.

- Almost all respondents (99%) felt it was important or very important that their local library provide a good collection of DVDs or CDs. The vast majority (85%) felt this was very important.

- For almost all respondents (97%), easy access was important or very important. Access was an important benefit for 74% of respondents.

- For 88% of respondents, it was either quite important or very important for their local library to be a welcoming place to spend time. This was very important for 48% of respondents, who were more likely to be female.

- Free cultural activities such as story-time, author talks and public lectures were important to 84% of respondents, particularly females. Just under half (49%) felt it was very important for their local library to provide free cultural activities.

- Almost two-thirds of respondents (62%) felt it was quite important or very important that their local public library provide opportunities to participate in online cultural activities. This was considered very important by 28% of respondents.

Other data from the online survey of library users showed:

- The vast majority (83%) of respondents believed there should be more photographic exhibitions at their public library.

- The vast majority (80%) of respondents believed their public library would be enhanced by having more poetry, music, or theatre performances.

- Two-thirds (69%) of respondents liked the idea of their public library having a multimedia lab for making video, audio or music productions.

- Over half (56%) of respondents believed it would be good to be able to make things at their public library such as crafts, woodwork, and so on. These respondents were more likely to be 55 years of age or younger.

- Half (50%) of respondents believed public libraries should have cafés. These respondents were more likely to be aged 24 years or younger.

- About a fifth (19%) of respondents believed public libraries should really be just for books.

- Nearly all (98%) respondents felt it was good that public libraries have internet and WiFi access.

- Nearly all (90%) respondents liked the idea of having community meetings and other activities in the library, particularly females and respondents aged 25 to 34 years.

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

1. Welcome to the Victorian Public Libraries Cultural Benefits Survey

Over the past few years, the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network have conducted significant research into the economic and social benefits of Victorian public libraries. We now turn our attention to the cultural benefits of public libraries.

Culture is hard to define but we've put together a working definition – it includes all the things we would normally associate with cultural activities such as art, literacy, storytelling, performance and reading, as well as the underlying values and beliefs that are capable of uniting us as a community. For the purposes of this survey, we've had to narrow our focus to the more tangible end of the spectrum in the full knowledge that there are many grey areas of equal importance. We hope you can enter into the spirit of things and do your best. If you've got any additional ideas, questions or stories that would help amplify this research, we would love to hear from you.

The State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network have commissioned Annie Talvé and Dr Sally Gray from Project Sisu to manage this research project. Along with a range of workshops and interviews taking place in selected regional and metropolitan libraries across Victoria, this survey provides all Victorian public library staff with the opportunity to contribute to the project.

We would appreciate you taking the time to have your say. The survey will take approximately 5–10 minutes to complete. All responses are confidential and the results will be treated as a collective set of data to be merged with the findings from the research project as a whole.

If you have any technical difficulties in completing this survey, please contact:
Annie Talvé
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Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

2. Cultural benefits in my community

*1. When thinking about the cultural role of your library, what are three tangible benefits you've noticed in your community as a result of your cultural activities?

*2. Looking at the list below, what are your top five in terms of impact and positive feedback? Please rank your choices as follows: One will be your top choice in terms of impact; five will be your fifth choice.

	1	2	3	4	5
Author talks	○	○	○	○	○
Book readings/launches	○	○	○	○	○
Reading groups	○	○	○	○	○
Literary festivals	○	○	○	○	○
Public lectures	○	○	○	○	○
Art exhibitions/installations	○	○	○	○	○
Performances – theatre, music, poetry	○	○	○	○	○
Storytelling/storytime	○	○	○	○	○
Literacy classes	○	○	○	○	○
Digital literacy classes	○	○	○	○	○
Cultural heritage & identity events eg Multicultural, Indigenous	○	○	○	○	○
Access to local history collections	○	○	○	○	○
Contributing digital content eg online book reviews, History Pin, wikis	○	○	○	○	○
Availability of library spaces	○	○	○	○	○

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

*3. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
It is important for public libraries to collaborate with local cultural institutions such as museums, galleries, writers' centres, local theatres etc.	○	○	○	○
It is important that staff within public libraries work well together to make our cultural activities successful	○	○	○	○
The design of public library spaces has little or no impact on the success of cultural activities	○	○	○	○
New partners are needed for public libraries to offer a broader range of cultural activities	○	○	○	○
Extra financial resources would not improve the success of my library's cultural activities	○	○	○	○
Effective promotion of cultural activities has a direct impact on their perceived success	○	○	○	○
A library café can enhance the overall perception people have of their library as a desired cultural destination	○	○	○	○
Good media publicity for cultural activities in public libraries is not as worthwhile as word-of-mouth	○	○	○	○
Cultural activities in public libraries serve the interests of an existing cultural elite	○	○	○	○

4. What suggestions or comments do you have about how public libraries can collaborate to make their cultural activities more successful?

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

5. What is one thing your library is not doing now, but would generate real cultural benefits for your community if you could do it?

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

3. Some personal details

✱1. Which library service do you work for?

Victorian Public Libraries

My library is: [▼]

✱2. What is your job role?

○ Library Officer

○ Library Technician

○ Librarian

○ Manager

○ Specialist staff eg marketing, technology

Other (please specify)

[   ]

✱3. How long have you been at your library?

○ 12 months or less

○ Between 12 months and 5 years

○ Between 5 and 10 years

○ 10 years or more

✱4. What is your age?

☐ Under 24

☐ 24 to 34

☐ 35 to 44

☐ 45 to 54

☐ 55 to 64

☐ Over 65

✱5. What is your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ Other

Cultural Benefits of Victorian Public Libraries

4. Thank you

Thank you for completing this survey. A comprehensive report of our research findings will be published in May 2014.

LIBRARY STAFF SURVEY: SNAPSHOT OF RESPONDENTS

The online staff survey attracted 438 responses from Victorian public library staff members in a range of roles:

- More than a third of respondents (36%) were library officers; 34% were librarians; 13% were managers; 11% were technicians. About 6% of respondents were specialist staff working in marketing and technology.

- Other respondents included the roles of library officer, administrator, library assistant, children and youth librarian, IT support person and community information officer.

- Respondents included short-, medium- and long-term staff members.

- More than a third of respondents (38%) had been at their library for ten years or more; a quarter had either been at their library for between five and ten years (27%), or between one and five years (25%). Just over a tenth (11%) of respondents had been at their library for 12 months or less.

- Staff respondents represented a range of ages, under 24 years (3%), 24 to 34 years (13%), 35 to 44 years (21%), 45 to 54 years (35%), 55 to 64 years (27%) and over 65 years (2%).

- The vast majority of respondents (88%) were female.

LIBRARY STAFF SURVEY: PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND CULTURAL BENEFITS

For the majority of library staff respondents, the following aspects of public libraries were important or very important in their perceptions about how public libraries foster cultural life. Table 5 lists the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses.

Table 5: Importance of aspects of public libraries

ASPECTS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES PERCENTAGE OF 'AGREE' + 'STRONGLY AGREE' RESPONSES	
Important for staff to work well together	98.2%
Important to collaborate with local cultural institutions	97.7%
Effective promotion of cultural activities has direct impact	94.9%
Important to attract new partners to offer a broader range of activities	92.4%
A library café can enhance the perception of the library	81.0%
Good media publicity is NOT as worthwhile as word of mouth	24.3%
Cultural activities serve the interests of an existing cultural elite	18.7%
Extra financial resources would NOT improve libraries' success	12.2%
Library design has LITTLE or NO impact on its success	10.1%

Responses often varied according to the respondents' age, position and time spent at their current library.

- Staff working well together: 98% agreed or strongly agreed; 68% strongly agreed. Those who strongly agreed were more likely to have worked at their current library for five years or more.

- Collaborating with local cultural institutions: 98% agreed or strongly agreed; 49% strongly agreed. Those who strongly agreed were more likely to be managers or specialist staff.

- Effective promotion of cultural activities: 95% agreed or strongly agreed; 49% strongly agreed.

- Attracting new partners to offer a broader range of cultural activities: 92% agreed or strongly agreed; 26% strongly agreed. Those who strongly agreed were more likely to have worked at their current library for ten or more years.

- A library café can enhance the overall perception people have of their library as a desired cultural destination: 81% agreed or strongly agreed, 29% strongly agreed.

- The majority of library staff believed that good media publicity was as worthwhile as word-of-mouth publicity. Only 24% agreed or strongly agreed that good media publicity was not as worthwhile as word of mouth; 4% strongly agreed.

- There was a perception among some library staff (less than 20%) that there was elitism associated with cultural activities in public libraries. About a fifth (19%) agreed or strongly agreed that cultural activities serve the interests of an existing cultural elite; 5% strongly agreed with that statement.

- A tenth (10%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the design of public library spaces has little or no impact on the success of cultural activities; 3% strongly agreed with this statement.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR LIBRARY STAFF

Library staff respondents were asked to reflect on two additional questions:

What suggestions or comments do you have about how public libraries can collaborate to make their cultural activities more successful? (315 responses)

What is one thing your library is not doing now, but would generate real cultural benefits for your community if you could do it? (319 responses)

There was a high degree of unanimity in response to these questions, as well as some frustration about the additional funding that would be needed to realise expansion and/or collaboration goals.

Both questions attracted similar kinds of responses and have been merged in the following summary list. The most commonly expressed ideas were:

- provide outreach programs, such as a men's shed
- facilitate debates or discussions about big issues
- have dedicated staff for promotion or outreach roles
- pay artists, performers and authors
- provide residency programs
- start a café

- provide more youth, Indigenous and multicultural events
- facilitate more visual arts, performance and poetry events
- plan more craft and literary events and festivals
- provide literacy and digital literacy classes
- ensure more and better designed library spaces
- get better resources in the country
- have more studio, recording and maker spaces
- facilitate more community-created content
- connect with collections in creative ways
- digitise more local collections
- more staff training, and thus greater competencies
- provide bilingual story-times and events
- tap hidden talent in the community, especially youth
- collaborate with cultural organisations, such as Diversitat, Neighbourhood House, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Opera Australia
- use our imagination…
- use social media
- start a library radio station
- attract more funding.