



READING AND LITERACY FOR ALL:

ADULT LITERACY –
VICTORIAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN ACTION

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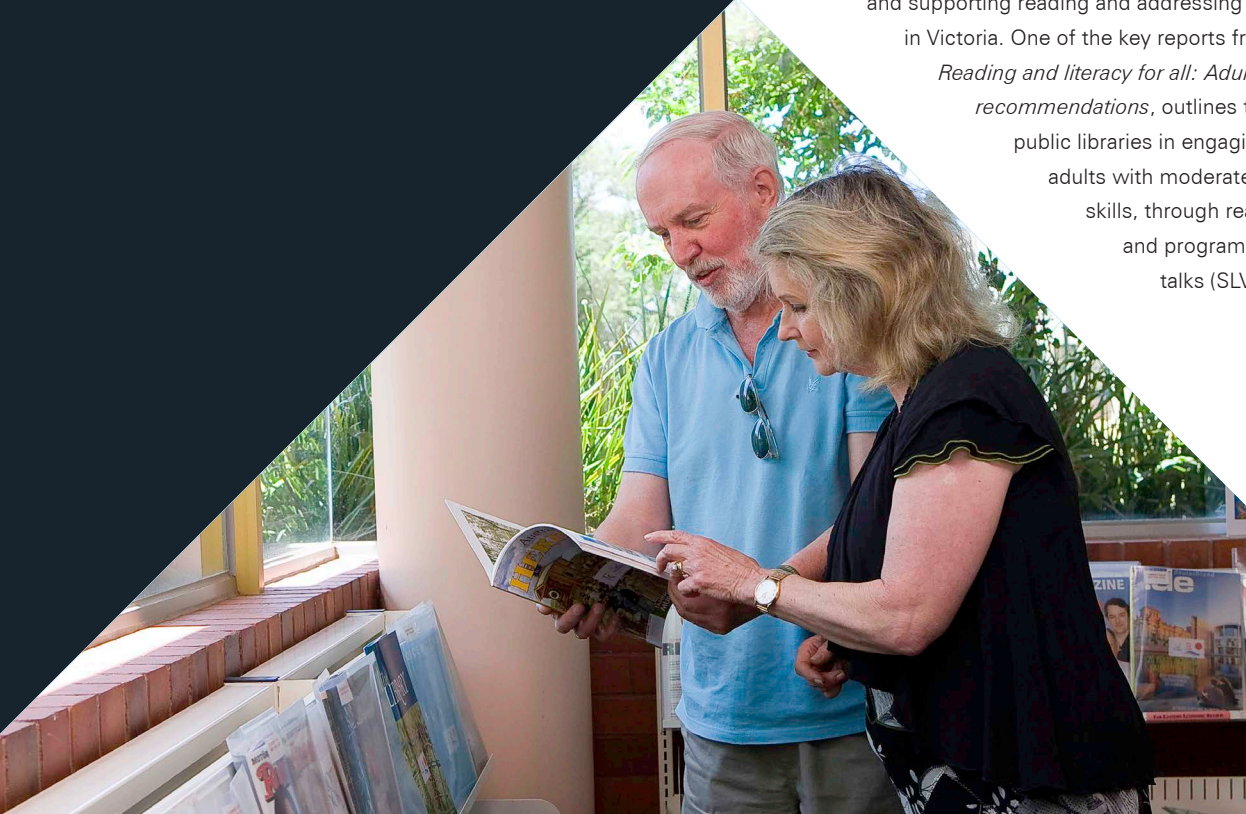
Introduction

Reading and literacy for all: Adult literacy – Victorian public libraries in action invites public libraries to consider the roles they can play at a strategic, tactical and program level in supporting adults with low-level literacy; and provides advice, intelligence and guidance on programs and activities that support reading and literacy development.

In 2015 State Library Victoria (SLV), in partnership with Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN) as part of the Statewide Public Library Development Projects, carried out a large-scale study of the reading and literacy services delivered by Victorian public libraries.

Reading and literacy for all: A strategic framework for Victorian public libraries 2015–2018 (SLV & PLVN 2015a) produced as part of this study, lays out the role of public libraries in promoting and supporting reading and addressing low levels of literacy in Victoria. One of the key reports from the study,

Reading and literacy for all: Adult literacy program recommendations, outlines the ongoing role of public libraries in engaging and supporting adults with moderate to good literacy skills, through reader development and programs such as author talks (SLV & PLVN 2015b).



Public library staff interviewed as part of the study indicated that, as a priority, they were looking for advice and ideas for appropriate activities and programs for adults with the very lowest levels of literacy.

Reading and literacy for all: Adult literacy – Victorian public libraries in action explores how libraries can support the 14 per cent of adults – that’s one in seven – in our community who have low-level literacy proficiency as measured by the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2013a). Adults at this level often struggle with tasks most take for granted: reading and writing lists, interpreting medicine labels, understanding road signs, using maps and using instruction manuals and other procedural texts that people encounter in their daily lives. Some have only very basic vocabulary.

This report contains insights, advice and guidance for the design, development and delivery of programs and activities for adults with very low-level literacy. It draws on experiences from the longstanding efforts of the adult education and community sectors, and on research into best-practice approaches to adult learning, to outline:

- the extent and characteristics of low-level adult literacy skills in Victoria
- the causes and impact of low-level literacy on individuals, the economy and society
- current government and community responses to the adult literacy challenge
- the role public libraries play in tackling low-level literacy
- what works and what doesn’t in the provision of adult literacy support.

Adult literacy – Victorian public libraries in action also includes case studies (see the appendix) that provide examples of how Victorian public libraries are:

- thinking strategically about innovative and effective programs and activities they can offer their communities
- designing and implementing approaches for successful outreach and engagement
- working with partners to develop community learning and library strategies that tackle low-level literacy at a community level
- developing adult literacy collections and resources that support library literacy programs
- building capacity for this work – for example through establishing literacy teams.

DEFINITIONS

Literacy at its most elementary is the ability to read and write, and it is considered a basic life skill. It encompasses an individual’s capacity to understand, use, reflect on and engage with written texts, in order to achieve goals, to develop knowledge and potential, and to participate in society (OECD 2003; SLV & PLVN 2015).

Literacy is defined here in terms of **English-language literacy**. In the case of people from a non-English-speaking background, low-level proficiency in the English language does not necessarily indicate low-level proficiency in their mother tongue.

To be functionally literate, adults generally require skills above Level 2 on the proficiency scale developed by the OECD for the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey (Anderson et al. 2014). Currently, just over half of Australian adults function at that level (ABS 2013a).

This report focuses on those with the very lowest levels of literacy, and defines **low-level literacy skills** as those at or below Level 1. See page 7 for information about the specific skills demonstrated by PIAAC respondents at literacy Level 1 and below Level 1.

Adult literacy: The challenge

‘Poor levels of literacy ... [are] bad for the economy, bad for society, and – most important – bad for those who have their life potential blighted by an inability to read.’

– Gail Rebuck (2009)

The modern world demands that citizens and workers have increasingly high-level literacy skills. It may have once been possible to get by without it, but literacy is now key to workforce participation, productivity and social inclusion (Standing Council for Tertiary Education Skills and Employment [SCOTese] 2012).

Research indicates that a lack of basic skills can lead to unemployment or low-paying jobs that provide little or no chance of promotion; to political exclusion; and to sustained intergenerational disadvantage (Rabinowitz 2016). As author Neil Gaiman (2013) points out, people who struggle

with literacy are ‘... less able to navigate the world, to understand it, to solve problems. They can be more easily lied to and misled, will be less able to change the world in which they find themselves, be less employable’.

Literacy is an essential life skill. It is the foundation of all education and development, and is central to economic, civic and social participation. In Victoria there is increasing demand for workers with strong communication, information-processing and cognitive skills (SLV & PLVN 2015a); there are also significant numbers of people whose literacy skills are below the standard required.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics suggests that in 2012 up to 46 per cent of Australian adults had literacy skills at or below Level 2 – insufficient to cope with the demands of an increasingly complex knowledge-based economy (ABS 2013a).

Of even greater concern is the 14 per cent of adults (almost 2.4 million Australians – over half a million Victorians) at the very lowest end of the literacy scale. People at or below literacy Level 1 have difficulty reading and comprehending simple documents and written instruction.



Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

Over the last two decades, the OECD has carried out three international surveys of adult literacy: the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1996; the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) in 2006; and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC – also called the Survey of Adult Skills) in 2011 and 2012. These surveys paint a rich portrait of adult literacy in the context of a broad range of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, and allow us to examine variation in skills across Australian states and territories and across time. The data also allows us to benchmark Australia's adult literacy levels against literacy levels in a range of other countries (Hagston 2014).

The PIAAC survey collected data on adults aged between 16 and 75 and was administered in 24 countries and regions in 2011 and 2012 (OECD 2013); in Australia the data was collected through the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

PIAAC reporting scales are divided into proficiency levels defined by score-point ranges. There are six proficiency levels for literacy and numeracy – levels 1 to 5, and below Level 1 – and each is described with a summary of the types of tasks an adult at that skill level is able to successfully complete (OECD 2013). *Adult literacy – Victorian public libraries in action* focuses on adults at or below literacy Level 1:

Below Level 1. Respondents at this level can read brief texts on familiar topics and locate a single piece of specific information. There is seldom any competing information in the text. Only basic vocabulary is required, and the reader is not required to understand the structure of sentences or paragraphs or make use of other text features.

Level 1. Tasks at this level require the respondent to read relatively short digital or print texts to locate a single piece of information that is identical to or synonymous with the information given in the question or directive. Knowledge and skill in recognising basic vocabulary, determining the meaning of sentences, and reading paragraphs of text is expected (OECD 2013).

PIAAC data shows that Australia has above-average performance in literacy compared with the other countries surveyed, with only Japan, Finland, Netherlands and Sweden performing better.

OECD skills outlook 2013: First results from the Survey of Adult Skills is a detailed (460-page) analysis of the PIAAC results. Accompanying it is:

- *The survey of adult skills: Reader's companion* (124 pages; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204027-en>)
- *Technical Report of the Survey of Adult Skills* (1000-plus pages; https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/_Technical%20Report_17OCT13.pdf).

The 32-page summary *Skilled for life? Key findings from the Survey of Adult Skills* (www.oecd.org/site/piaac/SkillsOutlook_2013_ebook.pdf) is an excellent place to start.

An audit of libraries' reading and literacy programs conducted in developing the *Reading and literacy for all* strategic framework found that Victorian public libraries are in a strong position to help adults with low-level literacy improve their skills. Libraries are widely accessible across Victoria; they offer an extensive and diverse collection of resources, including targeted collections that support adult literacy development; and they provide a welcoming, supportive and inclusive environment. They are uniquely positioned as 'safety nets' for English-language learners, and are often the first point of access to information and services. Some libraries employ literacy teams who, in addition to designing and delivering literacy programs, are able to assess literacy skills and needs, and provide referrals to appropriate community and adult education services.

State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network – the peak body for Victoria's 47 public library services – support the attainment of reading and literacy for all Victorians. Victoria's public libraries are committed to:

- raising reading and literacy levels and outcomes within the community
- creating and upholding best-practice standards of design, delivery and review of reading and literacy programs
- providing information to government, the community and library partners that communicates the vital role public libraries play in providing reading and literacy programs, collections and services for people across all life stages (SLV & PLVN 2015a).

Low-level literacy skills: What the research and data tell us

This section of *Adult literacy – Victorian public libraries in action* draws on international data and current research to get a clearer picture of the nature and incidence of low-level literacy skills in Australia's adult population. It debunks some pervasive misconceptions, which are often based on a superficial understanding of the complex set of factors that contribute to literacy, and which make it difficult to identify the best way to bring about real change.

The growing body of contemporary research into adult literacy provides a variety of insights applicable to library policy and program development; these insights are highlighted in green text throughout the following section. Of particular interest is *Development of a literacy framework for the State Library of Western Australia* (Anderson et al. 2014), which is an excellent resource for public libraries wanting to improve the support they provide to adults with low-level literacy.

The following analysis can assist public libraries to:

- assess whether their current literacy practices reflect and respond to the sound evidence available
- understand the design features that will contribute to more effective programs in the future.



ABOUT 14 PER CENT OF ADULT AUSTRALIANS HAVE LOW-LEVEL LITERACY SKILLS

The 2012 PIAAC data (ABS 2013a) indicates that 14 per cent of adult Australians – just over one in seven – have ‘very limited’ literacy skills (Level 1 or below, meaning that the person has difficulty matching text and information or drawing low-level inferences from simple print or digital text).

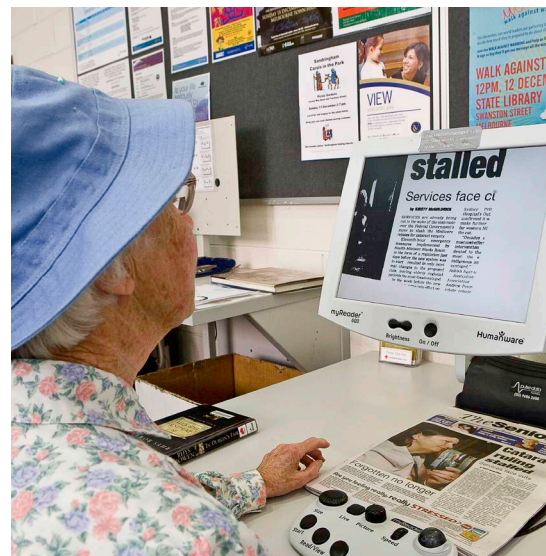
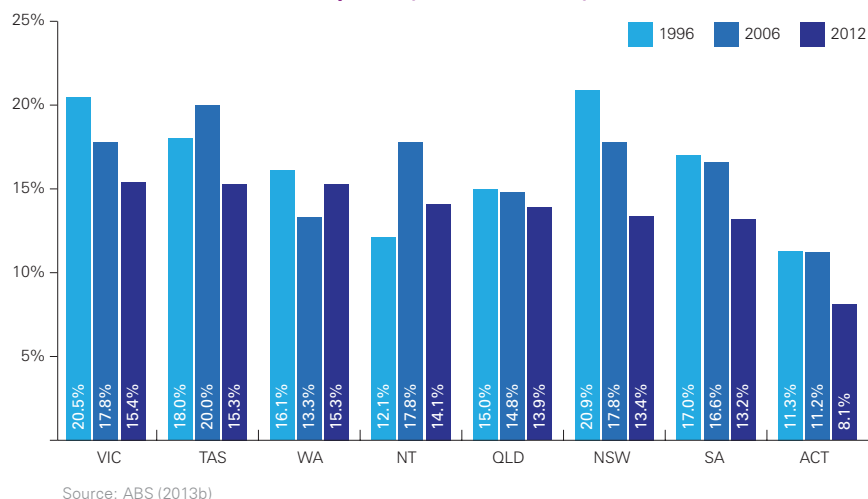
As shown in figure 1, the incidence of low-level literacy is higher in Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania than in other states and territories.

Figure 1: Percentage of Australians aged 15 to 74 with literacy skills at or below Level 1, by state (2012)



Between 1996 and 2012 there was a decline in the proportion of adults with low-level literacy skills in all states and territories except for the Northern Territory (figure 2). New South Wales and Victoria had similar rates of low-level literacy in 1996, but there was a more significant improvement in NSW over the period.

Figure 2: Percentage of Australians aged 15 to 74 with literacy skills at or below Level 1, by state (1996, 2006, 2012)



AUSTRALIA IS NOT ALONE IN HAVING A SIZABLE PROPORTION OF ITS ADULT POPULATION IN NEED OF LITERACY SUPPORT

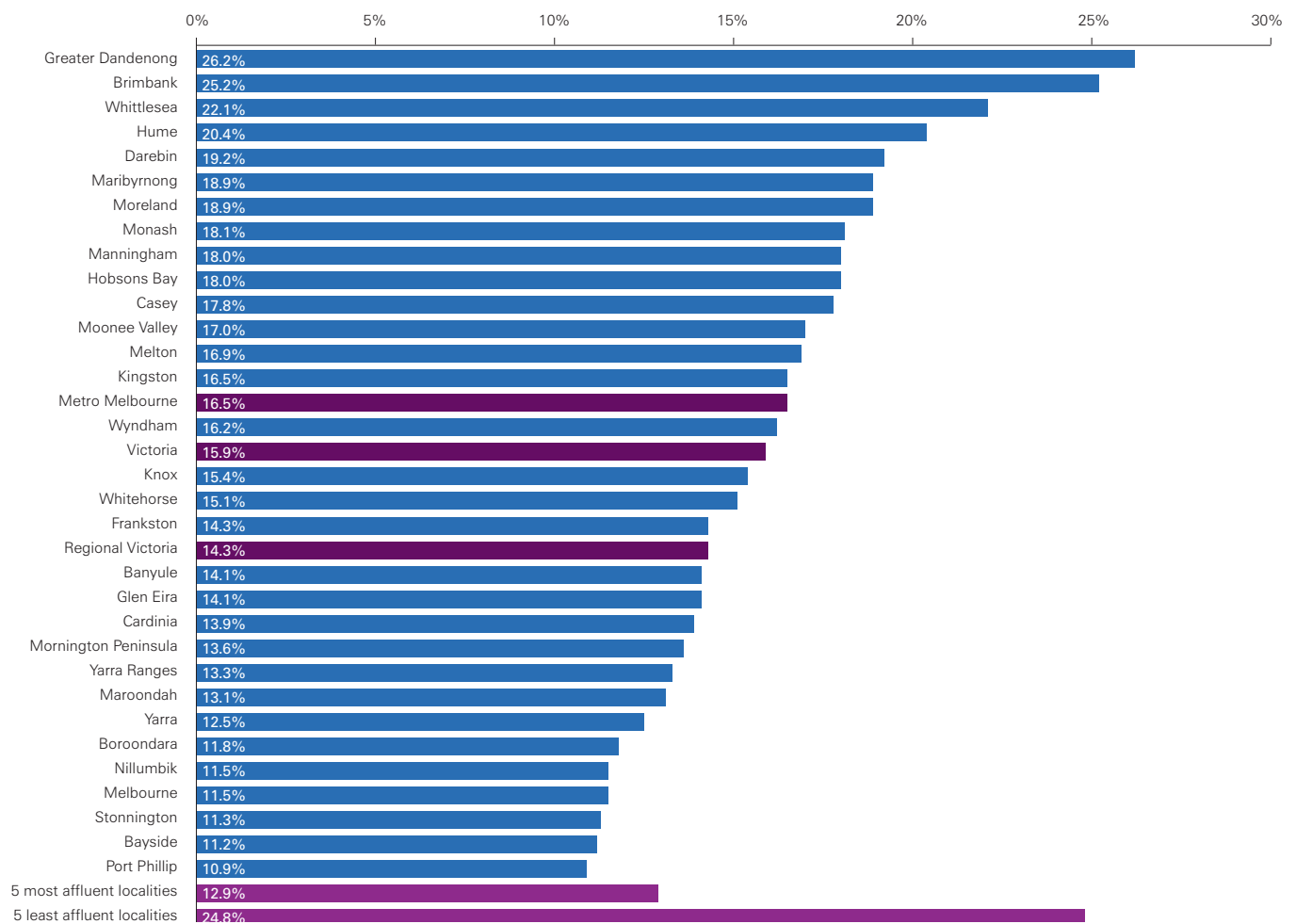
Even highly literate nations have significant challenges with adult literacy. In fact, in every country surveyed for the PIAAC study (except for Japan) at least 10 per cent of adults were low-level literate. In the United Kingdom this figure is 16 per cent and in Italy and Spain 30 per cent – significantly higher than in Australia (OECD 2013).

ADULT LITERACY IS AN ISSUE ACROSS ALL VICTORIAN MUNICIPALITIES, NOT JUST THOSE WITH HIGHER LEVELS OF DISADVANTAGE

Analysis in the report *Literacy and society: Selected findings from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* (Brown 2009) indicates that the rate of low-level adult literacy in Victoria ranges from about 10 percent in more affluent localities to over 25 per cent in the most disadvantaged.

Figure 3 represents an estimate based on 2006 ALLS data on the incidence of low-level literacy in various age, educational and birthplace groups; together with 2006 census information about the population of these segments of the community.

Figure 3: Percentage of Victorian adults with literacy skills at or below Level 1, by locality (2006)



Source: Brown (2009)

This data indicates that regional Victoria has a smaller proportion of adults with low-level literacy skills than metropolitan Melbourne, but more recent data is likely to show some municipalities with a higher proportion of adults at or below Level 1 (Brown 2009).

Victorian public libraries are geographically well placed to meet the needs of those with very low literacy skills, but it's important they identify which groups in their community are most likely to have low literacy rates. The characteristics of these groups – the challenges they face and the services and support they most need – are different in each municipality. Libraries can gather information by talking with other community organisations, education providers, local businesses and library users; and by conducting focus groups or surveys of library users and non-users.

The most successful literacy initiatives are those developed with input and advice from the community. When specific needs are identified, programs and activities can be designed and delivered accordingly (Anderson et al. 2014).

ADULTS WITH LOW-LEVEL LITERACY COME FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE

Low-level literacy is not well understood in the wider community, and many are unaware of just how widespread it is. One common assumption is that the only adults with literacy problems are those who didn't finish high school, or those who speak English as an additional language. In fact, nearly half of people with low-level literacy skills have Year 12 or a higher qualification; and almost two-thirds speak English as their first language (Kuczera, Field & Windisch 2016).

About one-third of people with literacy skills at or below Level 1 have a non-school qualification (a degree, diploma or certificate), and the majority are in the workforce (OECD 2013). Although this is a diverse group representing a range of lifestyles, experiences and achievements, most adults who struggle with literacy are economically and socially disadvantaged.

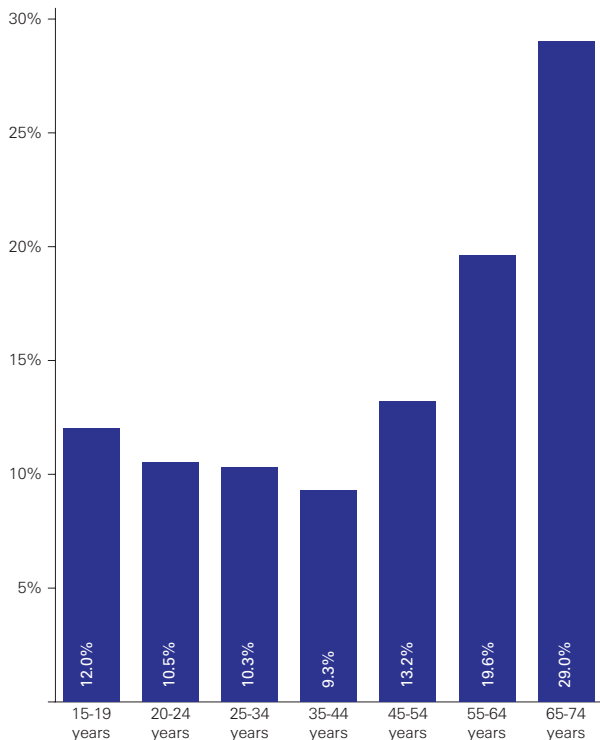
Adults with low-level literacy live and work in a variety of circumstances. Their needs are diverse, and they need access to a range of different opportunities and programs. Responsiveness in program design and delivery is important (SCOTese 2012).

For adults, building literacy is often a means to an end rather than a discrete learning exercise. Digital literacy programs can often be a 'hook' into the public library; adults seeking to develop their digital skills, for example, may find they need to develop their literacy skills as a prerequisite. Integrating literacy learning into digital literacy programs can be an effective way to connect with hard-to-reach learners and increase their access to, and take-up of, literacy skills development (Kuczera, Field & Windisch 2016).

OLDER PEOPLE TEND TO HAVE LOWER OVERALL LITERACY SKILLS THAN YOUNGER PEOPLE

As shown in figure 4, the proportion of people at or below literacy Level 1 increases with age, from about 10 percent of adults under the age of 45, to about 30 per cent of those of retirement age.

Figure 4: Percentage of Australian adults with literacy skills at or below Level 1, by age group (2012)



Source: ABS (2014a)

The National Adult Literacy Agency (2016) points out that literacy skills need to be sustained throughout life, not just developed: ‘Some people who develop literacy skills in their school years find that they can easily get out of practice if they don’t use these skills at work or home, and they lose confidence.’

The larger incidence of low-level literacy in this group may be, in part, because younger people have access to greater educational opportunities than were available to older generations. It may also be the result of older people no longer using their literacy skills after they have retired from the workforce – unused skills can atrophy.

International comparisons show that:

- older Australian adults perform better in terms of literacy than their counterparts in many other countries
- while younger Australians tend to have higher levels of literacy than older adults, the difference is not as pronounced as it is in many other countries: a 12 percentage-point difference in average literacy scores between the youngest and oldest groups, compared with 42 percentage points in Finland and 39 percentage points in Korea (OECD 2013).

As people age and spend less time in educational settings, it becomes increasingly important to engage in activities that involve literacy (OECD 2013). Communities and workforces are ageing, and there is a growing need for programs that focus on supporting adults to retain their skills (Reder 2011). Programs that read books or poetry to adults, including to older people in residential care (such as Campaspe Regional Library’s Words on Wheels – see the appendix) or those who are socially isolated, can go some way towards addressing this need.

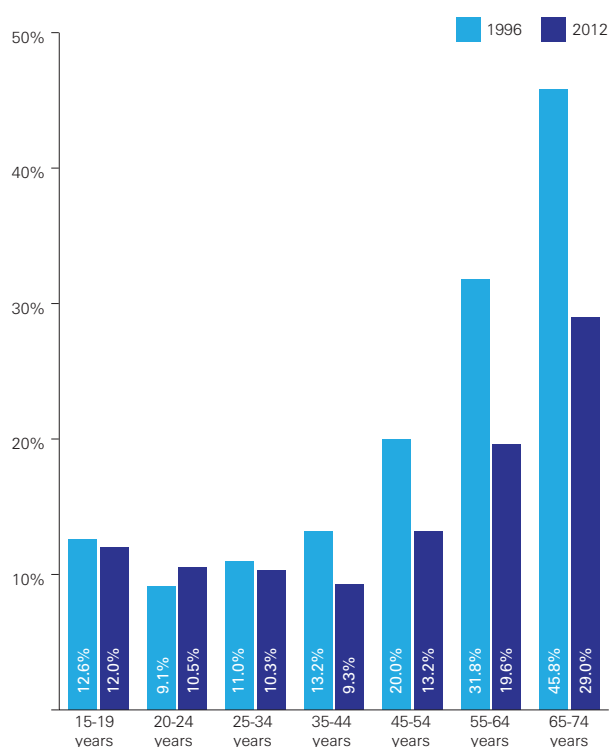
Library literacy programs need to connect with people wherever they are. In the case of adults with low-level literacy who are not in paid work, these connections could take place at home, in shopping centres, at Neighbourhood Houses and community centres – or at the pub or on holiday.



THERE IS A SURPRISINGLY LARGE NUMBER OF YOUNG ADULTS WHO HAVE LOW-LEVEL LITERACY SKILLS

In 2012, 12 per cent of Australians aged between 15 and 19 years and 10.5 per cent of those aged between 20 and 24 had low-level literacy skills.

Figure 5: Percentage of Australian adults with literacy skills at or below Level 1, by age group (1996, 2012)



Source: ABS (2014a)

As shown in figure 5, this was a small decrease for the 15 to 19 age group since 1996, and a quite sizeable increase for the 20 to 24 age group over the same period. This compares with significant decreases seen in older cohorts.

Data from the 2010 Programme in International Student Assessment (PISA) confirms that the literacy performance of young Australians is relatively poor when compared with students from other countries (Hagston 2014).

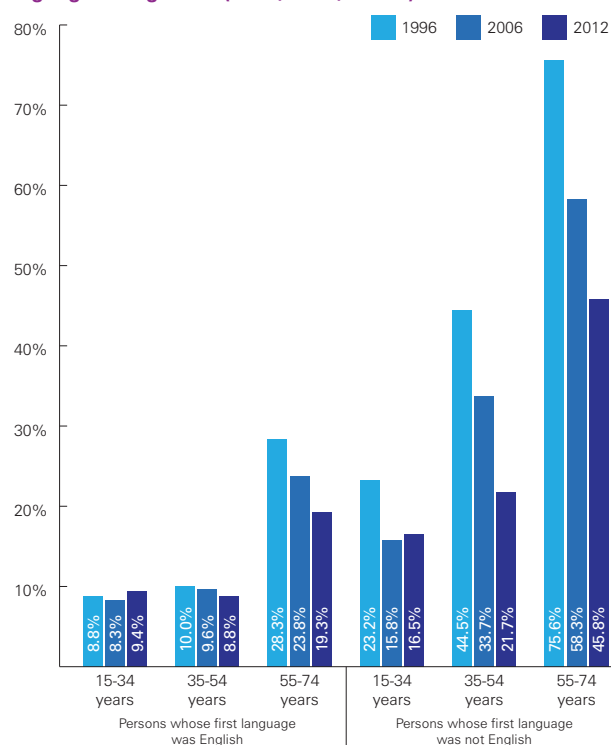
It has been noted by some commentators that the incidence of poor literacy skills amongst young Australian adults should be ringing alarm bells (Mendolovitz 2014). Libraries should look for opportunities to assist young adults – especially those who have left school early – to develop their reading and literacy skills.

MIGRANT COMMUNITIES HAVE COMPLEX LITERACY PROFILES

The OECD (2013) points out, 'The fact that immigrants, particularly those from foreign language backgrounds, have low proficiency in the language of the assessment does not imply that they have poor proficiency in their mother tongue.' In Australia this means that while people from a non-English speaking background may have lower levels of English-language literacy, they don't necessarily have low-level literacy skills per se (Shomos & Forbes 2014).

Between 1996 and 2012 there was a decrease in the proportion of migrants with low literacy proficiency whose first language is not English (figure 6). This is especially evident in the case of people from a non-English speaking background who arrived in Australia less than ten years before the survey and those who are employed (figure 7). The shift may be due in part to changes in the composition of Australia's migrant intake (Shomos & Forbes 2014), and also to an improvement in the language and literacy support provided.

Figure 6: Percentage of migrants aged 15 to 74 years with literacy skills at or below Level 1, by English-language background (1996, 2006, 2012)

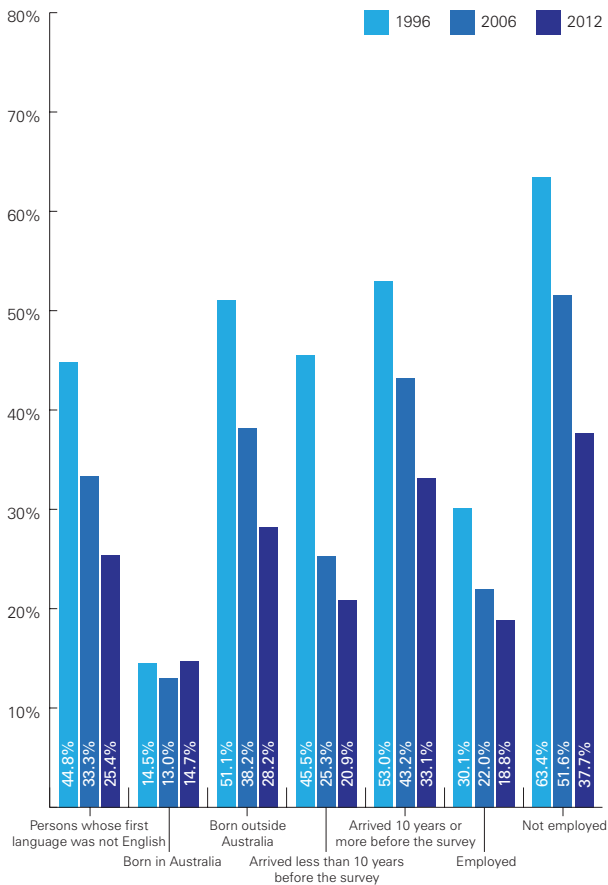


Source: ABS (2014b)

Younger migrants are less likely to have low-level literacy skills than older groups (figure 6), and the difference in literacy rates between the younger and older generations is greater for migrant groups than it is for the Australian population overall.

As shown in figure 7, people whose first language is not English are more likely to have low-level literacy if they were born overseas than they are if they were born in Australia.

Figure 7: Percentage of adults aged 15 to 74 years whose first language is not English and who have literacy skills at or below Level 1 (1996, 2006, 2012)



Source: ABS (2014b)

Low-level literacy is also more common among migrants who arrived in Australia more than 10 years ago than it is for more recent arrivals. Low literacy rates are extremely high amongst migrants who are not employed compared with those who are.

The groups of migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds who are most likely to be in need of literacy support are those who are not employed and those who have been in Australia for more than ten years without acquiring English literacy skills. There is a particular need for literacy support for people in this group who are aged 55 and over.

PEOPLE WITH LOW-LEVEL LITERACY SKILLS OFTEN HAVE 'SPIKY LEARNING PROFILES'

It is important to note that 'low-level literacy' describes a lack of skills rather than a lack of intelligence. People with low-level literacy usually have considerable abilities in other skill areas: some may have good oral skills, others good occupational and people skills – and some may be highly literate in a language other than English. Literacy is a set of skills that can be developed (Colter 2016).

Libraries should concentrate on individuals' strengths and their special interests as a way to develop literacy. Avoiding a 'deficit' model and embracing a strengths-based approach to learning is more effective in developing learner confidence and maintaining motivation. Encouraging parents to read to their children is a good example of how this might apply in a library setting. Some adults with lower levels of literacy are able to cope with picture books, and in reading to their children they are able to strengthen their own skills.



LOW-LEVEL LITERACY CAN BE INTERGENERATIONAL

People who grow up in a family with low-level literacy skills often have poor literacy skills themselves.

Literacy problems can be cyclical even if adults in a family value literacy: parents with low-level literacy are often unable to read to their children, help them with their homework, or model good reading habits and behaviours (Trammell 2005).

Literacy is the key to opportunities in almost every aspect of life, including employment, education, social inclusion and access to services. Poverty and low-level literacy '... create a mutually reinforcing cycle that is difficult to break' (McCoy 2013).

Family literacy programs can be a key to engaging, motivating and effectively working with adult literacy learners.

While family literacy programs are primarily designed to improve early literacy learning, the benefit to adults can be significant. This is especially true of programs that explicitly seek to improve adult skills by modelling reading behaviours to children's parents, grandparents and carers.

Well-designed family programs have been shown to benefit adults in terms of employment and self-confidence, as well as improve their parenting skills and their ability to assist children with school work (Benseman & Sutton 2011).

'Admitting you can't read is just as scary as walking out in the street in front of a car. But when you find out there are many others in the same boat, and you discover that you really can learn to read, it's like you're on a new planet.'

– middle-aged man enrolled in a literacy program in the USA (McIntosh, 1994)

LOW-LEVEL LITERACY SKILLS ARE OFTEN WELL CAMOUFLAGED

Literacy was once restricted to certain segments of the population and was not necessarily highly respected. It certainly wasn't essential for participating in life or work. Over time, however, literacy skills have become crucial; the written word has been elevated to a high status, and there is a stigma attached to being unable to read and write.

Not surprisingly, people often do their best to disguise literacy problems for fear of discrimination or other repercussions. The stigma attached to low-level literacy and numeracy can discourage people from seeking assistance and participating in training.

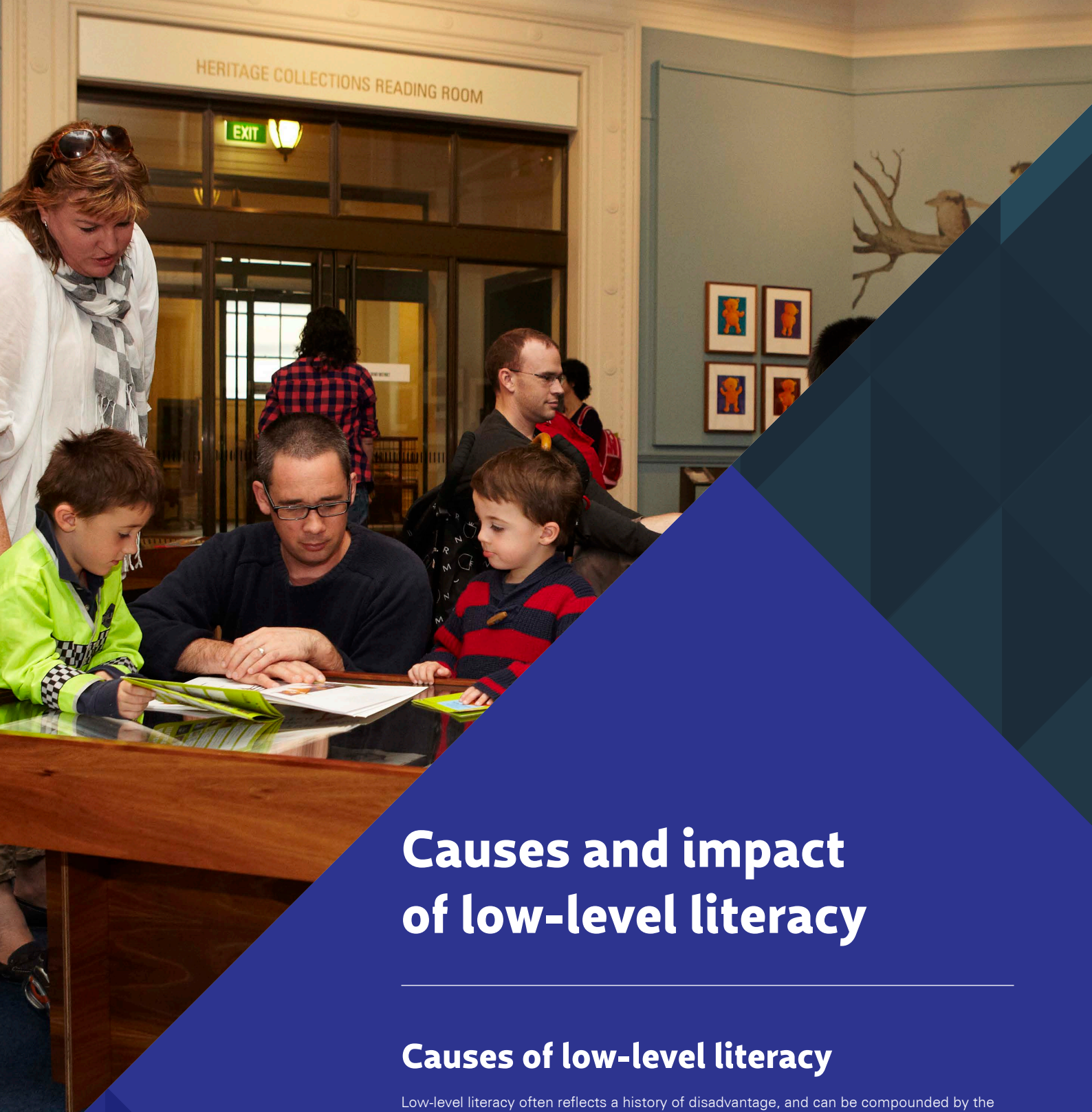
It is not possible to tell whether a person has low-level literacy skills simply by talking to them. In one US study, medical practitioners asked to identify which of their patients were very low-literate (defined as reading below a third-grade level) got it wrong 80 per cent of the time (Colter 2012).

There can be many reasons why it is difficult to tell that someone has low-level literacy skills: they are often articulate; most have developed coping mechanisms that hide their situation; and they don't always think of themselves as being poor readers.

It is hard to know who among the large number of people visiting the library might need support or might benefit from access to literacy resources and programs. People are more likely to talk openly about the support they need when library staff are open, friendly and approachable. Visual material and audio messages in the library can also help inform people of the support that is available to them.

Adults' self-esteem and confidence can be built through participation in literacy programs (Dymock 2007). It can increase their perceptions of themselves as learners and persuade them of the benefits of improving their reading and writing. These are important steps on the road to literacy. Libraries should design their reading and literacy programs with the clear intent of achieving these outcomes.

Services that help library users to read a document, or complete an application form, are of great value to people with low-level literacy, and they can be excellent ice-breakers. (Note, however, that there are issues of privacy and legal liability to consider when assisting with some documents, such as those from Centrelink or the tax office.)



Causes and impact of low-level literacy

Causes of low-level literacy

Low-level literacy often reflects a history of disadvantage, and can be compounded by the challenges of learning in a second language (Bynner & Reder 2009). Literacy skills are also adversely affected by a lack of opportunities for post-school learning; the workforce is now increasingly casualised and there is often not a lot of support or training provided.

Other factors that contribute to low-level literacy include:

- poor or disrupted educational opportunities
- negative experiences at school that lead to learning being seen as a bad experience
- having parents who have themselves had little schooling
- having few (or no) books at home and not being encouraged to read
- difficult living conditions
- poor hearing or eyesight or problems with speech (that may have been unrecognised)
- specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, that may not have been diagnosed or treated
- poverty and lack of access to educational resources (Literacy Foundation Canada [a]).

Impact on individuals

Literacy skills can mean the difference between holding a job and being unemployed. Weak literacy skills can have a devastating effect on health and self-esteem, limit career choices and prevent people from reaching their potential as citizens, parents and educated consumers.

PEOPLE WITH LOW-LEVEL LITERACY SKILLS FIND IT HARD TO COPE IN THE MODERN TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD

We live in a time when multiple literacies are essential for communication. Adults with low-level literacy face a double bind: they lack the basic skills (like reading comprehension) that are needed for seeking out and understanding information; and many lack even the most basic technology skills.

Adults who struggle with literacy have been severely affected by the large scale migration of services and information to the digital space. Where once it was sufficient to make a telephone call or fill out a paper form, government programs, learning providers and workplaces now require people to interact online – to access and use digital technology that may be unfamiliar, and for which they lack the necessary literacy skills and digital competencies (Digby & Bey 2014). The resulting disadvantage for low-literate adults is an under-recognised and ongoing challenge.

One way of addressing this is through learning programs and courses that support adults to develop their literacy and technology skills alongside each other.

PEOPLE WITH LOW-LEVEL LITERACY OFTEN GET TRAPPED IN JOBS WITH FEW OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP THEIR SKILLS

People with weak literacy skills have fewer opportunities for success in the workforce. Many work in low-paid, unpleasant or insecure jobs, are unemployed, or are excluded from the labour market.

Participation in adult learning helps people to develop and maintain literacy and numeracy skills, especially when the learning programs require participants to read and write, and confront and solve new problems (OECD 2013).

Literacy problems can lead to employment patterns that reinforce and are reinforced by low-level basic skills (Kuczera, Field & Windisch 2016): people in this situation rarely benefit from access to adult learning, and their skills remain weak or deteriorate over time. This makes it even harder to participate in learning activities.

PEOPLE WITH LOW-LEVEL LITERACY TEND TO HAVE POORER HEALTH

Most aspects of our lives – study, work, participation in community activities – require literacy skills. People who struggle in this area can be at great risk of poor physical health, anxiety, depression, and poor self-esteem.

A 2014 UK study for the National Literacy Trust shows that people with entry-level literacy are three times more likely to have their daily activity limited by poor health than those with functional literacy (Level 3 and above); and they are three times more likely to report deteriorating health (Morrisroe 2014). Australian researchers Hartley and Horne (2006) note that international studies have linked low-level literacy to higher rates of depression and hospitalisation, and to problems understanding and complying with instructions for the correct use of prescription drugs.

In 2014 Brimbank City Council, in partnership with Victoria University and the Mitchell Institute, undertook a research project examining the link between health and education. *The Brimbank atlas of health and education* (Public Health Information Development Unit [PHIDU] 2014) reports on the significant relationship between education and health and shows how this persists even when other important factors, such as income, are taken into account. Though the causal relationships between health and education are complex and not yet fully understood, the report posits a number of ways in which higher levels of education influence health.



These include the following.

Better knowledge and healthier behaviours. Educated populations are able to access information about health and understand the impact of risky health behaviours; navigate the healthcare system; understand and make decisions about available care options; and manage illness.

Employment and income. People with higher levels of education have an increased likelihood of having higher paid work and being able to afford preventive healthcare, private health insurance and choice in healthcare providers. Higher incomes also offer the choice to move from environments affected by high levels of pollution, stress, crime and other conditions that can have adverse effects on health.

Social and psychological factors. Educated individuals are more likely to enjoy higher social status and better support networks, a sense of agency, confidence and problem-solving skills – all of which are beneficial to health in terms of their influence on stress, health behaviours and access to emotional and practical support. (PHIDU 2014)

Public libraries are in a strong position to help people gain literacy skills and also to provide them with access to mediated information on health issues.

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LITERACY DIFFICULTIES AFFECT THE LIVES OF NEW SETTLERS IN MULTIPLE WAYS

The ability to read English is a factor in migrants' workplace participation (figure 6) and influences the employment opportunities available to them. It also affects their capacity to navigate Australia's complex medical, educational and social support systems (Knox City Council 2012).

Victorian public libraries have a strong focus on providing literacy support to this group. They play an important role in integrating new migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds into the community.

LOW-LEVEL LITERACY SKILLS ARE A BARRIER TO READING FOR PLEASURE

When adults struggle with basic literacy skills they are likely to find reading unenjoyable, and are less likely to see it as a key to success in life. Literacy opens the door to reading as a pastime, and all the pleasure and benefits associated with it (ABS 2012).

Impact on the economy and society

‘Weak basic skills reduce productivity and employability, damage citizenship, and are therefore profoundly implicated in challenges of equity and social exclusion.’

– Kuczera, Field & Windisch (2016)

LOW-LEVEL LITERACY INHIBITS ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Basic skills – numeracy and literacy in particular – are prerequisites for developing the higher order skills that productive workforces require today (Shomos & Forbes 2014).

The Australian Industry Group report *Tackling foundation skills in the workforce* (2016) notes that the rapidly changing Australian economy demands a workforce with increasingly sophisticated skills, and that this is consistent with requirements across the OECD.

There is a well-established link between literacy and productivity (Coulombe, Tremblay & Marchand 2004). The large number of Australian adults with low-level literacy and numeracy skills is seen to be negatively impacting on the economy, and the Australian Industry Group calls for a sustained national focus on strengthening foundation skills.

LOW-LEVEL LITERACY IS A BARRIER TO SOCIAL AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Adults’ involvement in their communities and their capacity for civic participation is made very difficult when they lack the basic skills to access the information they need to gain an understanding of the issues that impact on society. Low-level literacy is an obstacle to full and equal involvement in political and social discourse (Literacy Foundation Canada [b]).

David Tout from the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL; 2007) argues that a literate and numerate population is a necessary foundation for a thriving society and that Australia needs to create opportunities for lifelong learning in multiple environments.

‘As well as the socioeconomic factors, low literacy levels ... [have] implications for participating in the democratic process, understanding policies, voting, as well as being able to interact with government agencies.’

– Stewart Riddle (2013)

Responding to low-level literacy

National literacy policies, strategies and programs

Concerns about adult literacy are not new. For the last few decades a large number of countries have struggled to find appropriate responses to persistent rates of low-level adult literacy.

Low-level literacy amongst adults poses a complex policy problem that has neither straightforward causes nor straightforward solutions, and successful interventions are relatively uncommon (Windisch 2015).

It is widely accepted that low-level adult literacy can never be effectively addressed by organisations working in isolation. The solution requires a whole-of-government response to develop and implement national policies and strategies, resource and support adult and community learning services, and encourage employers to invest in developing their workers' skills (Adult Learning Australia 2011).

However, despite national governments' ongoing investment in literacy and numeracy skills, progress has been slow. Australia's 2012 literacy results remained largely unchanged from the results of 1996 (OECD 2013).

'Adult literacy is a stubborn, apparently intractable problem that belies simplistic solutions.'

– Gail Rebuck (2009)

NATIONAL STRATEGIES

Policies of later decades, however, have become narrower and targeted at a small proportion of the population, and are arguably less effective.

The 1987 National Policy on Languages was widely recognised by literacy experts as a significant and forward-thinking attempt by government to address Australia's language, literacy and numeracy needs (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011).

The 1991 Australian Language and Literacy Policy provided funding for research, professional development and adult literacy programs; and it led to new collaborations between government, industry, practitioners and educational institutions (ACAL 2006).

In 2010 the government announced the Sustainable Skills Strategy and committed to a \$120 million investment in adult literacy and numeracy activities and to the development and implementation of the National Foundation Skills Strategy. Australian governments agreed to work collaboratively to develop the national strategy (SCOTese 2012).

The 2012 National Foundation Skills Strategy was designed to address gaps and duplication in language and literacy education and support people to access and participate in the training required for trade or professional occupations. It was endorsed by all governments and identified common goals and priorities for the next decade (Anderson et al. 2014).

Criticism of the strategy centres on its employment focus: 'While well intentioned, the initiatives and approaches tie the right of all Australians to read and write and use numeracy at a basic level to their employment or job seeker status.' (Adult Learning Australia 2011)

'In the early 1990s Australian national adult literacy policies and strategies were the envy of the Western world.'

– Australian Council for Adult Literacy (2006)

NATIONALLY FUNDED PROGRAMS

There are currently several key literacy-focused programs funded through the Commonwealth Government and delivered at the local or regional level through contracted bodies.

Adult Migrant English Program

(AMEP; www.border.gov.au/Trav/Life/Help/Learn-English). This national settlement program provides free English-language tuition for eligible migrants and humanitarian entrants who do not have functional English. The objective of the program is to assist recently arrived migrants and humanitarian entrants to develop the English-language skills they need to engage and participate, and be included more broadly in society. Each client is eligible to receive up to 510 hours of free English-language tuition, and people who have had difficult pre-migration experiences are eligible for an extra 400 hours through the Special Preparatory Program. The AMEP is delivered nationally by 13 service providers with learning centres in more than 250 locations.

As well as language tuition, AMEP service providers offer ongoing educational counselling, advice on options for further study, and referral to services.

Skills for Education and Employment

(SEE; www.education.gov.au/skills-education-and-employment). Support is available to people aged between 15 and 64 who are looking for full-time work, are registered as active jobseekers and are in receipt of specific Centrelink payments. The program helps participants improve their speaking, reading, writing or basic maths skills to help them get and keep a job. The program offers training as part of accredited courses across the country in metropolitan, regional and remote locations.

Reading Writing Hotline

(<http://readingwritinghotline.edu.au>). Australia's national telephone referral service for adult literacy and numeracy support provides information on available courses, tutors and other people who can help, and learning resources.

Adult and community learning

Each year thousands of Victorian adults receive language, literacy and numeracy assistance in community settings provided by the Learn Local sector. Learn Local adult and community learning (ACE) providers are community owned and managed and not for profit. They include training centres managed by major not-for-profit organisations (for example, Yooralla, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Jesuit Social Services and Melbourne City Mission); Community Houses, Learning Centres, Community Colleges and Neighbourhood Houses; and a number of providers specialising in services for culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Parker 2014).

Learn Locals play an important role in assisting adults to continue their learning in a supportive environment, and they provide opportunities for people to start or extend their working life by upgrading their skills or by making appropriate career transitions. 'Many adults opt for this form of skills development because they do not need accreditation, or because they would struggle to complete an accredited course' (Golding 2010).

For those who want and are ready to undertake accredited learning, Registered Training Organisations (which include TAFEs, private providers and many Learn Local organisations) offer support for literacy development through:

- certificates in General Education for Adults, which provide skill development in the areas of reading, writing and numeracy in preparation for higher level study, employment or community participation
- certificates in Spoken and Written English, which provide support for people for whom English is an additional language, giving practice in listening, speaking, reading and writing as well as help with grammar and pronunciation at beginner level.

Insights from the field

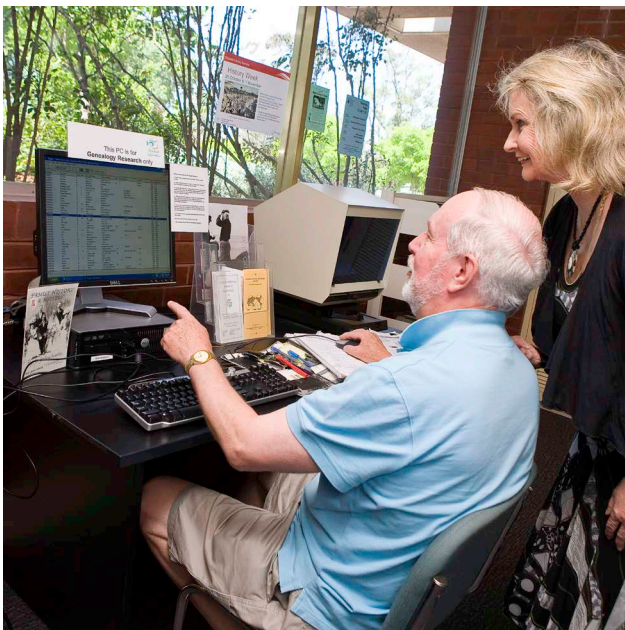
Over the years the training and community education sectors have learnt a lot about engaging people with low-level literacy skills and designing appropriate programs to meet their needs.

This work has been supported by a significant amount of research and evaluation undertaken by or on behalf of these sectors, into areas such as:

- understanding community need
- identifying, reaching and engaging adults
- designing and delivering appropriate programs and activities
- overcoming barriers to learning
- providing incentives and motivation for adults to learn
- working in partnerships.

Lessons from this research can inform and support public libraries in developing and designing programs and activities to meet the needs of those with low-level literacy skills.

Information for the following sections draws on the research presented in *Hard to reach learners: What works in reaching and keeping them*, by Lisa Nechvoglod and Francesca Beddie (2010).



UNDERSTANDING NEED

Consultation with local agencies that provide support to individuals and communities with low-level literacy can provide important insights into community needs; and local population data can inform literacy program and collection development. Filters can be applied for variables that tend to be correlated with poor literacy skills, such as:

- education levels
- socioeconomic and demographic factors
- internet uptake at home
- the extent to which languages other than English are spoken.

Having rich conversations with potential participants is often the best way to develop an understanding of community needs. These conversations should start from a point that recognises the strengths and skills of participants. Some people may find it difficult to join in these conversations; a trained facilitator or bilingual aide can be helpful in opening the conversation to a wide range of viewpoints and ideas.

Feedback from participants is an important source of information. It is essential to check how well a program or activity is meeting the needs of the people involved, and to make adjustments accordingly.

‘To a large extent, adult non-readers remain hidden, hard to identify, difficult to reach and, above all, reluctant to enrol in the literacy programmes that could actually make a difference to their lives.’

– Gail Rebeck (2009)

‘As you plan an adult literacy program, you need to consider what learners want and need. Their motivation comes not from what you think they should have, but from what they see as necessary in their lives.’

– Phil Rabinowitz (2016)

REACHING THE ‘HARD TO REACH’

There are significant challenges associated with making contact and connection with people who are amongst the most socially excluded adults in society. In particular, it has been found that the more formal approaches of inviting people into ‘your space’ are less likely to work than approaches that meet people ‘on their own turf’ in a non-threatening environment where there are social activities, food and conversation.

People may not attend a gathering, program or activity in a location that is inconvenient or unfamiliar to them. Libraries need to consider where people are most likely to be – at a community centre or a local football club, for example – and how they can best be approached.

Experience emphasises that once you reach people it is crucial to take time to build relationships with them before you engage them in discussions about literacy and their future learning. This may involve something simple such as informal conversations, events or social activities.

To raise interest in a program you need to be able to sell its relevance to people’s lives and help them to see the benefits it can provide. One way to connect with participants is through someone who is from their own community or culture and who has a practical and authentic understanding of the everyday challenges they face. They can establish stronger relationships with current and potential participants, gain more clarity around community needs and preferences for study, and also provide clear messages to potential participants on the importance of literacy proficiency.

Many studies have found that children are an enormously important link for parents back into learning. Parents’ aspirations for their children are often the key motive for overcoming any reluctance or practical or financial barriers to learning. Family-friendly programs and ones that provide child care while parents are learning can help service providers to make connections.

DESIGNING AND DELIVERING APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

Learners’ characteristics, aspirations, background and needs should be at the centre of literacy programs and activities (Dymock 2007). Training and education programs must be appropriate to participants and of good quality. It is crucial that providers listen to what participants need and want, and respond to the way they want programs and activities to be delivered. If a program or activity isn’t appropriate and of good quality, people will vote with their feet.

Adults need to feel that whatever they learn is relevant to their needs and is delivered in a way that is responsive to their life and personal circumstances. Adult literacy learning is most successful when the students are involved in the design process and are encouraged to express their ideas and draw on their experiences. Learners should be enabled to explore the methods and materials that help them to learn most effectively, and to take an active part in defining their goals and planning the learning program.

The research (Nechvoglod & Beddie 2010; National Adult Literacy Agency 2016b) emphasises that:

- adults learn best when the environment is supportive, relaxed and friendly
- adult learners are generally goal-oriented and want their learning to be clearly defined with achievable goals
- incorporating literacy development into other training (such as IT training) can be an effective way to embed basic foundation skills
- programs and activities need to be delivered in such a way as to establish confidentiality and respect for different cultures, beliefs and ways of life
- it is important to recruit staff who can relate well to hard-to-reach learners and who can modify their approach to meet different needs.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Engagement strategies are crucial in tackling motivational issues stemming from low self-esteem and poor previous learning experiences, but good results are dependent on learners receiving support from other parts of the system.

Adults with low-level literacy can face numerous challenges – educational, social and financial – in accessing learning opportunities, including family constraints and imperatives; poor access to transport to attend programs; schedules that conflict with paid work or other commitments; and the prohibitive financial costs of undertaking training. Appropriate support services must be made available if they are to engage with and continue their learning.

PROVIDING INCENTIVES AND MOTIVATION FOR ADULTS TO LEARN

Retaining participants' involvement in learning, and developing patterns of regular attendance and punctuality, is a significant problem for many literacy and numeracy programs.

Suggestions for encouraging persistence include:

- providing short 'taster courses' to draw in hard-to-reach learners – non-accredited taster courses can help build confidence and skills to move into longer programs
- developing participant learning groups that foster a sense of belonging and provide mutual support
- developing learning goals and measuring progress so that learners can see what they are achieving
- supporting learners to build confidence in their potential to learn, through successful completion of challenging tasks
- ensuring program leaders are approachable and responsive to learners, so that any difficulties can be dealt with in a timely manner (National Adult Literacy Agency 2016b).

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIPS

The strong message running through the literature is that partnerships between learning providers and other support services can help make the journey for reluctant learners less bumpy and more likely to succeed.

Literacy partnerships allow partners to:

- benefit from shared resources, costs, knowledge, skills and experience
- improve the chances of attracting the 'hard to reach'
- avoid service duplication
- enhance the image and raise the profile of services
- improve the chances of success.

It has been found that successful partnerships are highly dependent on having lead personnel based in each of the collaborating organisations who are strongly committed to the partnership effort (Gelade, Stehlik & Willis 2006).

Factors contributing to effective partnerships include:

- a firm belief in the value of a partnership approach
- clear benefits for all partners
- alignment of values and goals
- open lines of communication
- a clear governance model
- monitoring progress and celebrating success.



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CONTENTS

Insights from Victorian public libraries in action

This final section of *Adult literacy – Victorian public libraries in action* references eight case studies that describe the role Victorian public libraries play in supporting and enabling adult literacy. (The case studies themselves are presented in the appendix.) As with other sections of the report, the focus is on adults with low-level literacy skills.

An audit of libraries' literacy programs and activities was conducted in 2015 in the course of developing the *Reading and literacy for all* strategic framework. The audit indicated that approximately 40 per cent of Victorian public libraries provided adult literacy activities or English-language programs explicitly targeted at improving reading and oral skills for adults with low-level literacy skills. For example:

- English conversation groups, classes and language cafes
- access to online adult literacy programs
- library tours for adult education students.

The audit was used to identify appropriate case studies from across Victorian public libraries for inclusion in this report. These case studies demonstrate how libraries are meeting adults' literacy learning needs, and include examples that illustrate the value of the work being accomplished.

The case studies were selected to represent a good state-wide spread and to demonstrate public library literacy activities across a range of areas:

- support for development of a strategic and joined-up community response to adult literacy
- direct delivery of adult literacy initiatives, programs and activities
- collaboration with, and support for, adult literacy programs delivered by other community-based organisations
- development of outreach and engagement strategies to reach people with low-level literacy skills.

Information for the case studies was obtained through review of existing documentation and through site visits.

Focus groups and interviews were held with a range of staff – from CEOs to library coordinators, collection managers and literacy managers and coordinators. A small number of volunteers and program participants also provided input.

Analysis of the case studies provides a number of key insights for public libraries considering developing strategies that focus on adults with very low-level literacy skills.

WORKING WITH ADULTS WITH LOW-LEVEL LITERACY IS HARD AND COMPLEX BUT CAN BRING ENORMOUS REWARDS

The work of public libraries in supporting adults with low-level literacy is in its infancy. This is in contrast to libraries' long history of supporting early years literacy development through a range of well-established and well-loved programs. (Public libraries are seen as 'owning that space'.)

Early years work is supported by extensive and well-accepted research that shows the benefits of reading for children's development and identifies the pedagogical approaches that work best. Research into adult literacy is much more limited. Findings have not been as well promoted in the community and have not gained the political traction of early years research. There is less evidence of what constitutes good learning practices in adult literacy.

Library managers interviewed for the case studies emphasised how much more complex it is to work with low-literacy adults than it is to work with children and their families through storytime and other early years programs. Adults who return to learning come from many social and cultural backgrounds and life experiences. Many have had limited access to formal

schooling, have been disengaged from education since they were in their early teens and may not have been employed before. They may be 'hard to reach' for a variety of reasons, including their vulnerability, social isolation and exclusion.

Several libraries noted that engaging diverse population groups is complex because different people and groups have different issues and needs. Libraries have to provide a range of approaches and services to respond to these. This requires significant commitment of resources, and causes dilemmas in determining which communities should be prioritised for support.

Some of the barriers to public library involvement in supporting adults with low-level literacy skills include:

- limited time and funding for this work
- lack of clarity of the role of libraries in this sphere – especially vis-à-vis the adult and community education sectors
- concern that libraries may not have a culture and skill base to support this work
- limited awareness of the research into adult literacy learning and the principles for guiding this work.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES HAVE SIGNIFICANT ROLES TO PLAY IN ADVANCING ADULT LITERACY – AS STRATEGIC LEADERS, ADVOCATES, SERVICE DELIVERERS AND COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS

The case studies highlight four main approaches currently being used by libraries to progress their work with low-literacy adults.

01

Leading development of a strategic and joined-up community response to adult literacy – by establishing a network of local community and education providers. This represents big-picture thinking that is bold and innovative – and most likely to have a significant impact on low literacy rates over the medium to long term. Within this context, there is a role for public libraries in advocating for greater awareness of and support for adults with low literacy proficiency.

02

Development and implementation of literacy strategies and plans that:

- spell out libraries' role in tackling low-level literacy in their communities
- define the range of actions, programs and activities to be adopted for this purpose
- recognise the challenges libraries face in this role (such as building capacity and skills to deliver programs).

03

Design and delivery of innovative literacy activities and programs

– often in conjunction with partners that tackle high priority needs in the community. The early stages of this work usually focus on identifying and understanding community needs, and on outreach and engagement, and are followed by program design and implementation.

04

Facilitating access to local learning programs and support services

– by referring people to programs delivered by local providers, and by providing space and resources for local providers to deliver their literacy programs.

Libraries use different combinations and components of these approaches to achieve their goals. In the long term, successful intervention depends on libraries adopting all four approaches.

IMPROVEMENT IN ADULT LITERACY RATES AT THE SCALE REQUIRED IS ONLY POSSIBLE THROUGH A JOINED-UP APPROACH – NO GROUP OR ORGANISATION CAN DO THIS ALONE

It is clear from the experience of the case study libraries that the complex task of improving adult literacy cannot be achieved by any one organisation working in isolation. It requires a coordinated and strategic approach involving adult educators, community organisations and stakeholders in government, business and the advocacy sector.

Three of the case study libraries (Eastern Regional Library Corporation, Brimbank and Wyndham) are taking a leadership role in developing joined-up approaches for improving adult literacy and learning in their communities. They are initiating joint planning with multiple stakeholders to develop innovative and effective responses; this is occurring in the context of council learning and/or literacy strategies and plans. Libraries are most likely to take this approach when there is a clear leadership role (such as Manager Libraries and Learning) within council.

This work is driven by concern for the social and economic impact of low-level literacy and English-language proficiency in their communities. It can reflect specific concerns that, because of a skills deficit, local jobs are less likely to be filled by local people than by more-skilled people from outside the area.

There is also an awareness that current approaches to adult literacy in their communities are disjointed, do not provide clear learning objectives or pathways and are unable to deliver the level of change that is required.

Wyndham Libraries took responsibility for organising a consultation process that included local businesses and local education and community service providers to develop a strategy that would provide a coherent, integrated and coordinated approach to adult literacy and learning. This has been important for raising awareness of the roles public libraries play in supporting adult literacy development; and for gaining recognition of how their work can fit with the work of formal and informal education providers and community service organisations. One of the aims is to develop a shared understanding of the community's literacy needs and agree on sound approaches to addressing these.

Joined-up approaches are complex because they involve building relationships and committing to work together; developing a shared understanding of the adult literacy challenges in the community; and establishing the most effective means to tackle these challenges. It takes time, and in the early stages there may be no concrete outcomes in terms of improved literacy levels. However, this approach lays the strategic foundations for improved literacy in the future.

THERE IS A BIG CHALLENGE FOR LIBRARIES IN IDENTIFYING, REACHING AND RESPONDING APPROPRIATELY TO ADULTS WITH LOW-LEVEL LITERACY

Some adults, such as those with low levels of literacy and those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, can feel uncomfortable visiting public libraries.

Case study libraries identified that conducting outreach into the community can be an effective way to make contact with a diverse range of people. Access to services is usually a barrier for the most socially isolated groups, especially those who may be reticent about going to a library. Going out to them is a way to help people feel more comfortable.

The case study libraries have a good appreciation of the importance of initially meeting people on their own turf, in an informal environment where there is a hook to engage them (such as through social activities, food and conversation in a place other than the library). Children provide good opportunities to engage parents, who are keen to see their children develop reading and writing skills that will help them progress to a better life.

Eastern Regional Libraries Corporation (ERLC) runs the Young Parents' Group, which welcomes young adults who are disengaged, have low-level literacy and want somewhere to hang out. ERLC uses its flexi-service vehicle to engage participants and provide an early literacy program that does interesting things. The library stresses the importance of meeting the young parents in their space and on their terms as a way of building trust. This service has been provided over two years; the participants have developed a relationship with the library officer running the program, and the group is now very engaged.

Creating formal partnerships with groups like Centrelink and other community organisations with a shared interest in literacy is another way for libraries to reach and engage diverse populations. Several of the case study libraries offer services and programs in conjunction with service providers already working with a disadvantaged group. (Melbourne Libraries, for example, provides a program in conjunction with the Choir of Hard Knocks.)

Public libraries need to market and publicise their services widely. The case studies suggested that libraries can be promoted through partnerships, and radio and television advertising. Wyndham City Libraries is already using advertisements at the local cinema to attract people to its branches.

Frontline staff in several of the libraries say it can be difficult to engage with and support library users who have low-level literacy skills. Some are concerned about causing offense and others are not sure what resources they have to offer. These staff are looking for advice and access to appropriate training courses.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES' APPROACHES TO ADULT LITERACY ARE MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN LIBRARY PROGRAMS AND COLLECTIONS ARE WELL INTEGRATED

All of the case study libraries have literacy collections but (with some exceptions) these tend not to be well used. This is partly due to the collections not being well linked in to library programs and activities, or being out of date. Several libraries commented that people with very low-level literacy skills are unlikely to browse the shelves for books and other resources, but that take-up is increased when the materials are used or referenced in programs.

ADULTS LEARN BETTER WHEN PROGRAMS ARE ENJOYABLE AND BUILD ON THEIR INTERESTS

It is crucial that the activities delivered by libraries are enjoyable and help to create trust, build relationships and motivate people to remain engaged. Library programs that are low-key and designed to enhance social and communication skills can build self-confidence and provide a boost to learning.

Some libraries are seeing the links between basic competence in oral communication, reading and writing as a key feature of literacy development and learning. Programs are often more fun when they're based around speaking and listening, and encourage greater interaction between participants. They can be a first step to (English-language) literacy.

RETENTION OF ADULTS IN LITERACY PROGRAMS OFTEN MEANS ADDRESSING THE EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL BARRIERS THEY FACE

In order for library literacy programs to be successful there needs to be support from a range of community services, such as childcare providers. Adults with low-level literacy often face multiple barriers to learning, and these may force them to drop out of learning programs and activities. Many of the case study libraries are already offering support, or are in the process of developing it – often with partners – to help learners engage with programs.

ESTABLISHING DEDICATED STAFF TIME AND IDENTIFYING FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES ARE KEY CHALLENGES FACING PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE DELIVERY OF ADULT LITERACY SERVICES

In common with other community organisations, public libraries are under pressure to expand services and programs in line with community expectations, while operating within a tight financial framework. For most libraries the issue is about identifying what will best meet the needs of the community, now and in the future, and setting this against the capacity and capability of the library service to deliver programs and activities.



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Appendix:

Case studies of Victorian public libraries in action



Brimbank Libraries

The City of Brimbank is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse municipalities in Australia. Over 150 different languages are spoken across the City, and more than half the population speaks a language other than English.

The area was originally inhabited by the Kurung-Jang Balluk and Marin-Balluk clans of the Wurundjeri people. There is now a small but growing number of indigenous residents in Brimbank that form a significant community with a rich culture.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports that in 2011 about 13 per cent of residents in Brimbank had little or no English, compared to the Victorian average of 5 per cent. It is expected that this figure will have increased with the growing number of migrants from India, China, Vietnam and African countries.

Having low-level or no English literacy is one of the many challenges new arrivals face. This challenge may be mitigated for migrants who are literate in their native language, but the time and effort needed to develop English-language skills will generally be greater for those who are not.

Given this population profile, a major focus of the adult literacy work in Brimbank is on developing English-language literacy programs that address some of the challenges and barriers community members face.

Strategy

In Brimbank, programs and activities supporting improvement in adult literacy skills are advanced as part of a broader community learning strategy, which has been developed over the last six years with leadership from the Brimbank City Council's Libraries and Learning department. The *Brimbank community learning strategy 2014–2017* supports learning in all life phases and is a long-term approach to improving the learning, social and economic outcomes of individuals and the community. It is supported by the *Brimbank library strategy 2015–2020*, and provides a framework for facilitating partnerships between Council, community organisations, education providers and industry to progress this work.

The community learning strategy has a steering committee with a high-level group of people from a range of organisations, including Lead West, Youth Services, a number of State Government departments (Department of Education and Training, Department of Health and Human Services, and Regional Development Victoria), community organisations and Brimbank Communities for Children.

The vision is to create a community of lifelong learners. The initial priority is to support the achievement of functional English-language and literacy skills for all adults. The emphasis is on a strategic and coordinated approach that addresses the root causes of poor reading and writing, and supports recently arrived communities with little or no English to improve their language skills.

BRIMBANK LEARNING FUTURES

Providing suitable learning opportunities is a significant challenge for Brimbank. Currently there are only a small number of Learn Local organisations in the area, and this limits access to informal and pre-accredited learning. Experience and research indicates that targeted interventions are required establish new ways of delivering training and to work in partnership across community organisations to offer a connected service response.

Brimbank Learning Futures (BLF) is part of a new education precinct in the heart of Sunshine opened in 2016. Its development – the funding and support for project staff, utilities, maintenance, security, IT and the fit-out of the facility – was made possible through a partnership between all three levels of government. The focus is on community members who have Year 9 as their highest level of schooling; and young people at risk of being, or who already are, disengaged from education.

Council will seek organisations to provide a range of services from the centre. These will include:

- outreach programs to identify and engage participants
- programs that support adults in their first steps to literacy and learning and provide pathways to employment
- services, including child care and careers advice, that help overcome barriers to participation.

The activities of the centre provide a major plank in the strategy to improve adult literacy skills. Brimbank Libraries are central to this effort. Learning becomes a reality through libraries – through the programs they offer; the spaces and places they provide for study; and the library collections that encompass items for all types of readers, including DVDs, audio and talking books, magazines and coffee table books, comics and manga.

Of particular value is the community engagement and connectedness that occurs through libraries (Brimbank Libraries was voted the most family-friendly service in Brimbank in a Communities for Children survey); the new Sunshine Library in adjacent Hampshire Road will provide direct participation linkages to BLF.

Programs

The *Brimbank library strategy 2015–2020* supports the implementation of the *Brimbank community learning strategy 2014–2017*; it is an important base for developing Brimbank Libraries' adult literacy programs and services, and for endorsement of this work by the Council executive.

Library programs are strategically targeted to support the community's learning and leisure needs and enhance social and economic outcomes. They support the development of Brimbank as a learning community, promote lifelong learning, are inclusive and culturally relevant, and provide informal learning opportunities for people at all life stages.

Programs are delivered through Brimbank's five libraries, in community settings and through the online library. Many programs are developed and delivered in partnership with other council departments, local community agencies and the education sector.

'English literacy' and 'Developing a reading culture' are two key themes of the libraries' strategic programs framework, and these drive program development and delivery. A large proportion of the 3000 programs delivered in 2013 and 2014 focused on literacy and reading.

PROGRAMS FRAMEWORK

The programs framework has been in place for seven years, and is embedded in and shapes program design, development and delivery. It encourages staff to think strategically about programs at the planning stage so that the library can ensure resources are allocated to high-priority projects that are well targeted, provide good outcomes for the community and are congruent with the library environment.

The framework requires that every program under consideration should support at least one of seven key strategic themes. These have been identified through an assessment of community demographics, a review of current programs and discussions with community members and program partners about priorities. They cover:

Reader Promotions Group. The main objective of this group is to enthuse and encourage staff and customers to develop a love of reading and to raise awareness of its importance. It has representatives from all library branches and senior staff.

Conversation clubs. People come along and talk about the issues of the day or their favourite hobby. The clubs provide a way to meet people who enjoy stimulating conversations on a range of topics, and morning tea is provided.

Practice your English. Participants practice their conversation and listening skills in a relaxed environment. These are weekly sessions for adults who speak English as an additional language.

Learning Hub. This portal on the Brimbank Libraries website (brimbanklibraries.vic.gov.au) features online learning courses, resources and activities. The Learning Hub includes the Learning & Information Exchange, where service providers and community members may post anything with a learning focus that is free or low cost and based in either Brimbank or the Western Region.

Staff culture and capability

There has been considerable transformation in the role and work of Brimbank Libraries. This is supported by a staff culture that emphasises being proactive and provides opportunities to work on developing and delivering value-added services and programs for the community in conjunction with partners from other sectors.

A diverse group of people now work in the Libraries and Learning department, including qualified library staff, a youth worker, a community development worker and a teacher.

Staff have a competency framework that guides their work and they are supported by training and conversations that foster open dialogue and create alignment. There is now greater flexibility in terms of staff roles, and the library plays to peoples' strengths. Staff are expected to work across programs and so the ability to be adaptable is important.

- early years learning
- supporting school years learning
- developing a reading culture
- English literacy
- supporting skills for gaining employment
- social connectedness
- digital literacy.

Each strategy has a set of program themes and learning outcomes to inform the design process. For example, under the strategic theme of English literacy, program themes and learning outcomes include:

- increased engagement with residents who are recent arrivals
- improved English literacy skills
- provision of informal learning opportunities
- provision of opportunities for social interaction.

Insights

DEVELOP THE FOUNDATIONS

There is enormous value in having a learning strategy in place – signed off by the Executive or Council – as the foundation for your work. Administrators in Brimbank are excited by the Learning Strategy work and there is excellent buy-in from the community sector.

COMMUNICATE YOUR GOALS

Think carefully about what messages you want to give to Council. Tell them why you are doing things differently and what you are going to achieve. Don't just present the statistics, tell a real story – tell a better story. Help Council see the outcomes from the literacy work across the community.

POSITION THE LIBRARY

It is important to position your library in the context of learning. This involves moving away from transactional work by, for example, bringing in automation for check-out and book return. Staff can then focus on providing value-added service to the community.

WEAVE LEARNING THROUGH EVERYTHING YOU DO IN THE LIBRARY

Connect things together. Ensure that your programs are well connected to the library collection so that you can leverage value from this. For example, use the English as a second language (ESL) collection, including resources such as Rosetta Stone (computer-assisted language learning software), for learning English. Learners can start their study in groups, immersed in this tool, and then work towards independent learning. English-language tutors regularly bring their students to the library to access online and physical collections in groups and then in time, students gain confidence to visit the library to study on their own. This is a good model, as it encourages users to become independent learners.

ENGAGE, SUPPORT AND MOTIVATE LEARNERS

Involve people from the community and investigate what they need and why. Talk to providers and community groups and make sure you understand the community. Develop new ways of engaging different populations.

- Attract parents through engaging with their children. Teach them to speak and read to their children, in any language, and help them to understand that this will give their children a head start when they begin school.
- Ensure that support services are provided to help people overcome the barriers they might face in attending programs and courses.
- Find inspirational people in your community and get them to talk about what they have been able to achieve as adult learners.

DESIGN PROGRAMS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF DIFFERENT CULTURAL AND AGE GROUPS

Different groups have different cultures and ways of engaging and learning. Brimbank's experience with the Learn English through Storytime program is an excellent example of how libraries can navigate these differences and respond with appropriate services.

Brimbank Libraries staff noticed that Vietnamese parents were not attending storytime. Through discussion with community members and local service providers, it emerged that the parents wanted to learn English but did not want to leave their children in childcare. Library staff then developed Learn English through Storytime, which helps parents learn English through sharing books, stories and songs with their children. Class sets of picture books were purchased so that each family group can share the same book and learn together. Active participation of the parents is a key to the success of the program, as is modifying the regular storytime program to meet the particular need.

Campaspe Regional Library

Often when politicians and policy makers talk about adult literacy their attention is on the need to develop reading and writing skills for the purpose of career development and employment. Few concentrate on the literacy needs of Australians who are socially isolated, or of older people in community and aged care facilities who need literacy skills for their physical and mental wellbeing, recreation and enjoyment. These are amongst the groups that Campaspe Regional Library (CRL) targets through its adult literacy programs and activities.

Outreach and engagement

CRL employs an outreach community coordinator to make connections with people across the region who are socially isolated and/or have low-level literacy skills and are unlikely to visit the library.

Outreach plays a crucial part in meeting the needs of the Campaspe community. The community has a significant number of people who are socially isolated due to various circumstances. This includes people who moved to the township after living on rural properties for most of their lives, people who are getting older and may have lost their partners and caregivers.

Families who move into town may want to integrate into the community but, having

lost confidence, find it is easier to stay at home. For others, there may be many barriers to socialising – such as

medical issues or lack of transport. CRL staff are genuinely concerned about the wellbeing of these community members, particularly their brain health and ability to communicate.

CRL's outreach service focuses on helping potentially isolated people become more confident through conversations, reading and games. It speaks to groups in the community, such as health centres, hospitals and retirement homes, about the library and its services and encourages them to promote these to their users.

Feedback on the outreach work of CRL staff suggests that it is a highly valued service.

Programs and partnerships

CRL has been the central adult literacy support in the region for many years and provides services through a number of activities and initiatives.

Commonwealth Reading Writing Hotline.

The library is the local contact, in partnership with the Echuca Adult Literacy Group.

Volunteer tuition. Volunteers provide basic and more detailed support, depending on the client's particular needs.

Referral services. These put library users in contact with organisations that can offer further support with numeracy and literacy.

Outreach services. Staff identify and support people who are socially isolated. The focus is on helping them become more confident, improve their reading, learn about technology through games and make social connections by coming into the library.

Programs. The library offers a variety of programs that support adult literacy. Words on Wheels, for example, is a senior storytelling program that reaches local aged care, planned activity groups, senior citizens and other organisations.

'I can't believe what you have done for me. I can't get on the table and dance anymore, but I will certainly sing your praises.'

– aged care resident to library outreach worker

LITERACY SUPPORT

Basic literacy support is available in the library. The emphasis is on responding to what people want. For example, the library assisted one young man to return to study by helping him develop the literacy skills he needed to complete assignments. Library literacy support helped another person who had to do an aptitude test for joining the police force. The aim of the library is to get the outcomes users are looking for.

Over the years the tutors that volunteer with the Echuca Adult Literacy Group have provided many people with basic and more detailed literacy support, depending on the need. Some people request help completing forms, or applying for a licence online; others need help preparing to sit for exams or entrance tests. Tuition is provided without charge; it is confidential and is provided in the library or in another location that suits the client.

ECHUCA ADULT LITERACY GROUP

The Echuca Adult Literacy Group was established in 1986, with government funding, to provide a volunteer-run tutoring program for adults with low-level literacy or numeracy skills. It operated through a space in the library, and was supported by a coordinator from CRL.

The group was discontinued as a volunteer service in 2004 due to changes in Centrelink regulations requiring people on benefits to undertake formal training through qualified providers.

CRL has sustained the Echuca Adult Literacy Group (which now incorporates the Rochester adult literacy groups). The significant adult literacy collection developed by the group remains with the library and work has continued through the library coordinator and a group of volunteers.

TECH TIME

Tech Time at the library supports people to use their iPads and other devices. Participants learn how to reply to an email, how to open a photo and so on. This is an important service for people who have received an iPad and want to keep in contact with their families who are some distance away.

WORDS ON WHEELS

The main program that sits between adult literacy and reader development is Words on Wheels (WOW), a seniors storytelling program that reaches out to aged care, planned activity groups, senior citizens groups and other organisations. Sessions are conducted by volunteers, and are run weekly, fortnightly or monthly, depending on the requirements of the group. Library staff design reading kits for the volunteers, who can also add their own props and other stories to the sessions.

WOW is aimed at people who may find it difficult to read by themselves. It is a social gathering and promotes story sharing – it's partly about reminiscence and partly about interests, hobbies or general knowledge. It rekindles memories by taking out old trinkets, old photos of horses and carriages and old clothes that people wore in the past. This helps to build relationships with residents and gain their confidence.

Sessions may get attendees to read aloud, and can also introduce people to digital skills or encourage them to play games. The coordinator notes that games that can be played on an iPad are great for people who haven't used technology before.

It is often suggested that aged care residents come to the library as a way of encouraging wider social interaction. This is easiest to facilitate when the aged care facility has a bus. Volunteers are available to give attendees a tour, sit and talk with them, play chess and show them how to borrow from the library. Many enjoy watching children's storytime, and some join knitting and sewing groups. WOW is a very effective way to get people talking.

Volunteers

Volunteers are the key resource that enables CRL to provide literacy support to the community. There are currently about 160 people registered as potential volunteers for the library, and more are coming from younger age groups than previously.

Recruitment is through an expression of interest, followed by a one-on-one session in which the literacy or outreach coordinator finds out what the volunteer's interests are and what work they would like to be involved in. CRL looks for volunteers who are flexible and versatile – for the WOW program they must have the confidence to present sessions.

All volunteers are provided with training and support. New WOW program volunteers are given storytelling guidelines and attend sessions to watch a practiced storyteller. They have the opportunity to build confidence and get experience presenting short pieces in conjunction with a knowledgeable volunteer.

Insights

CRL staff see significant opportunities to turn peoples' lives around through outreach and adult literacy programs. They have many stories of people who have fallen on hard times – because of a death or illness in the family or through losing a business – but who, through taking small first steps, have been able to change their lives dramatically.

They note the case of a young man living on a farm who managed to get by with low-level literacy skills until his parents got old and he became responsible for their care and running the farm. When he learnt to read through the library, he was very proud of his achievement and became more confident in his work and life. He didn't have to hide things anymore.

CRL notes that persistence and optimism are the main qualities needed in working with people who are isolated. What drives CRL staff is seeing the outcomes. It takes time and flexibility to build relationships and people's confidence – time to have conversations and to slowly break down the barriers, even

if people are reluctant at first. This is the first step to getting someone involved in activities that develop their literacy skills and confidence. It will set them on a path to other things.

CRL staff have identified some significant challenges and opportunities for advancing their work in outreach and literacy support.

Encouragement. Keep things in people's comfort zone. If they have low-level literacy they need encouragement – do not expect immediate commitment from them.

Outreach. Get enjoyment happening in people's homes, and then encourage them to attend sessions at the library. This builds new skills and connects them to other people.

Motivation. People have to be motivated to develop their skills. This must come from within and not be enforced from outside.

Commitment. Participants might not be used to routines and may not always keep their appointments. This can be very disruptive and impact badly on morale.

Volunteers. It can be hard to find the right volunteers for literacy programs, but it's very important. They don't have to have a background in teaching, but they do need to be knowledgeable and patient.

Partner relationships. It important to establish relationships in which you demonstrate to other providers that you are not competing with them – that you want to work together.

Diversity. There is an emerging culturally and linguistically diverse community in the area, and CRL needs to start planning to meet their needs.

Gaps. There are gaps in the literacy support available at CRL, the biggest one being in the Indigenous community. CRL is examining what other library services are doing in providing services to their communities.

Training. Library staff need to understand the philosophy and practice of literacy training, and upskilling is required.

Eastern Regional Libraries Corporation

While the east of Melbourne is often associated with middle-class, leafy suburbs that slowly roll into the beautiful, bucolic Dandenong Ranges and valleys, there are also large pockets of vulnerability and socioeconomic disadvantage. Many people in the areas serviced by Eastern Regional Libraries Corporation (ERLC) face challenges in accessing education, transport, health and other services; and it is estimated that between 13 per cent and 16 per cent of adults have literacy skills at or below Level 1 (Brown 2009).

A major driver for the literacy initiatives at ERLC has been observing the impact that low-level literacy skills have on people's lives: from the young disabled man in his late 30s who had promised his father he would learn to read by the time he reached 40, to the many people coming to the library for assistance with completing forms and applications. Stories of individuals' struggle to learn to read and write opens our eyes to the challenges faced by adults with low literacy proficiency and the courage of those who want to learn.

Library staff at ERLC are strongly motivated and committed to working with community groups and other stakeholders to provide opportunities for people in their community to gain the literacy skills they need.

The focus of the ERLC adult literacy work over the last two years has been on:

- preparing the library literacy strategy
- developing a strong network of community stakeholders who can work together to provide an effective approach to tackling low adult literacy in the community
- building library capacity and skills in the literacy area
- promotion and outreach to the community.

Strategy and leadership

The ERLC *Library plan 2013–2017* reflects a carefully considered approach to the development of its literacy activities. It was endorsed by the ERLC Board in 2014 and seeks to:

- reflect current understanding of the challenges faced by adults with low literacy proficiency and knowledge of what works best in adult literacy learning
- engage ERLC communities through promotion and outreach
- build capability within the library, including awareness of the best ways to engage and motivate adults who are often regarded as 'hard to reach'
- develop a collaborative approach to tackling adult literacy across a range of community-based organisations, charities and philanthropic bodies
- advocate for better literacy support at all levels of government and industry.

The intention is to develop a network in Eastern Region to harness the capability and resources of service providers and community groups to tackle the issue of low-level literacy skills among adults. This will connect the library with external opportunities and build a network that supports funding, relationships and training.

The ERLC literacy strategy was launched at the Literacy for Life forum in September 2014. In April 2015 stakeholders met to discuss their particular needs and interests and to build support for the idea of a literacy network. They considered whether they had the right people in the room, and how they might link with other groups, including some of the large welfare agencies, operating in the region.

The Adult Community Further Education Board has provided funding for a project officer to support development of the network, which will include libraries, neighbourhood houses and other Learn Local organisations, schools, TAFEs and other organisations.

Defining the role of libraries

The key goal of the adult and youth literacy work in the library is to work with partners to reach young people and adults who want to develop and/or improve their literacy skills, and to provide pathways to a positive literacy outcome.

ERLC aspires to:

- be an advocate for a greater understanding of the importance of literacy in the wider community
- maintain services and a staff culture that supports the library's role as a partner in improving literacy throughout ERLC communities
- develop strong ongoing partnerships with other organisations in order to reach out and deliver programs to those needing literacy education and support
- promote ERLC's role in supporting literacy for all.

ERLC has established partnerships with Neighbourhood Houses; migrant information centres; and the Outer Eastern Literacy Program (OELP), which is part of the Mount District Learning Centre. These partnerships can be built on for the delivery of adult literacy programs. ERLC staff also work with a number of other community groups that focus on literacy improvement, including the Linking Learning Working Group, Communities that Care Working Group and Leadership Group.

There are many features of public libraries that can support adult literacy. ERLC is able to provide:

- physical spaces that can be used for learning programs delivered directly or by local community service organisations and education providers
- access to resources including books, CDs, DVDs, reading lists and parenting collections
- online literacy training programs such as Road to IELTS and resources such as Tumble Books, Literacy Planet and Busy Things
- access to existing programs, such as Storytime, Bright Star and Tiny Tots, which can substantially benefit adult literacy.

See 'Outreach and engagement' and 'Programs and partnerships' later for more examples of how ERLC works with other organisations to support adult literacy and learning.

Outreach and engagement

It can be difficult to contact and connect with people who have low-level literacy skills. The more formal approaches of inviting people to the library for an event or tour are less likely to work than approaches that 'meet people on their own turf' in a non-threatening environment where there are social activities and conversation. These activities can provide vulnerable adults a stepping stone back into learning by developing their self-confidence and sense of optimism.

There are several ways ERLC connects with community members who might not otherwise engage with the library.

Delivering storytime. ERLC delivers storytime and activities at the local fire station at Ferntree Gully; at the Yarra Valley and Mountain District Football Grand Final; and at the Cinema Under the Stars program each summer in Bayswater, using the Knox outreach vehicle.

Young Parents' Group. ERLC uses its flexi-service vehicle to deliver this early literacy program to a group of young parents who are disengaged, have low-level literacy and want somewhere to hang out. The program reflects and responds to the young parents' interests, and has been provided over two years. While it has been hard work for library staff, it has successfully engaged the participants. The library stresses the importance of meeting participants in their space and on their terms as a way of building trust and developing strong relationships between participants and the library officer running the program.

Dads and Kids program. Dads with low-level literacy are recruited through schools, sporting bodies and organisations at the centre of the community. The program starts with activities such as clown and circus skills and some technology.

Library staff note that there are many opportunities for engagement if you know what is going on in the community and what people are hooked into. They also emphasise the importance of being aware of the trigger points at which people might start thinking about improving their literacy – for example, when a child starts asking, 'Dad, will you read to me?'

Programs and partnerships

ERLC works closely with migrant information centres, several community houses and Learn Local organisations across the region to co-produce programs that support literacy development.

THE OUTER EASTERN LITERACY PROGRAM (OELP)

This program is located at the Boronia Library and offers individual tutoring for those who have specific literacy needs; conversation groups to help migrants to speak and understand Australian English; and Road Rules for Beginners, which helps English-language learners to get their L plates.

Tutors are carefully matched with their students. Tutors and students normally meet at the student's house but they can choose other venues, such as shopping centres, cafes or libraries. Times are flexible too. Volunteers can tutor whenever it's mutually convenient for them and the student – during the week, after hours, or on the weekend. The tutor's role is to be a friend/mentor and make learning fun, interesting and relevant to the learner's life. This work is supported through a literacy collection held at the library.

The Basin Community House also delivers taster sessions in a number of subject areas at Boronia Library.

CENTRELINK INFORMATION SESSIONS

In response to the large number of library users seeking information about Commonwealth pensions and benefits, Centrelink was invited to present a series of sessions to address these information needs – including answering questions of eligibility and how to register for assistance online.

The first session looked at pensions. Several Centrelink staff came and worked at the library with library users, answered their questions and showed them how the online system worked. Feedback indicated that this was very valuable for participants. The next session will look at the NewStart allowance.

The library says that the key to making this program work was finding the right person at Centrelink: someone who was committed to making the sessions happen and senior enough to authorise allocation of resources.

A pop-up library in Centrelink has been used to get word out about the program and the support available at the library.

INCIDENTAL LITERACY LEARNING

Incidental learning plays a critical role in literacy development and especially in acquiring a strong vocabulary. Positive, powerful experiences with reading and exposure to new terminology can help to create excitement and curiosity about words. Incidental learning is most effective when it is planned for and when there is clear purpose behind the activities undertaken. It doesn't just happen.

Programs such as storytime and those targeted at digital literacy and reader development can offer significant benefits for adults seeking to develop or enhance their literacy skills.

ERLC runs weekly storytime sessions from all of its branch libraries. Children and parents alike benefit from this early introduction to reading. The libraries have now branched out further into the community to run a number of programs using outreach staff to visit children and parents in locations other than libraries. Programs such as the Reading Dog, Jump Start and Dads and Kids have demonstrated some great outcomes.

Collection development

There are certain items within the ERLC library collection that are used extensively by those looking to improve their literacy and English-language skills. These resources tend to be well used because they support a specific need.

Road to IELTS is one of these resources. It provides online learning to support non-English speakers who are required to demonstrate, through a test, English-language proficiency for migration, study or work. The resource is available at introductory to advanced levels and offers listening exercises. It is in high demand within the ERLC libraries.

Many items in the literacy collections at Boronia, and funded by the library, are used only occasionally. This is largely because they are not up-to-date in terms of outlook, information, ideas, appearance, or style.

The lesson is that collections generally will not be used if they are not regularly updated and not linked to literacy activities and programs.

Staff culture and capability

ERLC has a team of literacy staff who develop adult literacy programs. Other members of staff also contribute to supporting adult literacy skills through reader development programs.

The literacy team currently includes ten librarians who were chosen for their great empathy for those learning to read, their discretion and their ability to relate to adult learners in a relaxed and respectful way. ERLC is currently specifying in more detail what the role of the team will be, but it will include referral to other resources and services that can help people overcome barriers to literacy learning.

It is anticipated that the team will grow and that there will be a 'literacy champion' at each of the 13 ERLC branches. There will be an emphasis on enhancing the capacity of the team through access to appropriate training.

One of the current literacy team members recently attended a course for volunteer tutors run by the OELP. This involves 20 hours of training over eight weeks and examines issues such as what adults have to do to make that first step into literacy learning, how to engage with adult learners, and how to teach reading.

‘This is complex work – we are feeling our way through a minefield.’

– ERLC manager

Insights

REACHING AND ENGAGING PEOPLE

A significant challenge is the low self-esteem and social stigma associated with poor literacy skills. People are sometimes uncomfortable admitting to having a problem with reading and are too embarrassed to accept support. There is a need for community programs that open people’s eyes to their own capacity to learn, engage them on what matters in their life, and help them gain the self-confidence they need to be part of an informal learning program.

Library outreach programs are critical for reaching people in their own space, and for developing trust in the library service and confidence in what it has to offer them.

ERLC sees opportunities to engage the community in adult literacy programs and activities through marketing campaigns that use visual materials. These could include kits with DVDs providing information about what is available in the libraries. ERLC is also keen to explore marketing strategies that incorporate mobile phones, given their widespread use.

RESOURCES

The biggest barriers to greater involvement in adult literacy are lack of time and lack of funds. Libraries are not able to resource adult literacy programs and activities through their existing budgets, and so it is vital that they establish partnerships and draw on volunteer effort.

The increasing lack of foundation skills in the workforce is having an impact on productivity in many sectors. As more local employers struggle to find qualified and competent workers to keep their businesses and industries competitive, there may be opportunities to get local industry more involved. Public libraries may have an outreach role to play in workplaces where people require assistance to gain the basic skills and knowledge they need for work or for further learning and education.

SUSTAINABILITY

Literacy programs need to be there for the long haul if they are to gain the trust of participants and become well established and accepted in the community. Many adults with low-level literacy are highly vulnerable and have been let down by programs that have promised a lot but have been unable to deliver when funding ran out.

Literacy programs need to demonstrate genuine commitment to helping participants develop their skills. ERLC commits to including literacy as an ongoing part of its programming; and to working in partnership with other agencies to ensure appropriate resources are available for local communities.

It believes that sustainability is best achieved with:

- an explicit strategic plan
- a high-functioning network of partner organisations with a strong interest in literacy
- capable, well-organised and well-managed staff
- strong outreach.

FINDING THE RIGHT STAFF

The people who work in, and represent, the libraries’ adult literacy programs are the single most important elements in determining success or failure. Recruiting the right people to the literacy team, and forming links with the right contacts in partner organisations, is of vital importance. ERLC is currently defining the skills and attitudes needed for an optimal team, though it is clear that these staff require empathy and need to have a learner-centred approach and be persistent in their efforts.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Barriers to learning are often not only educational but also social and financial. So as well as tackling motivational issues stemming from low self-esteem and poor previous learning experiences as part of the engagement strategy, effective results will also depend on good support in areas such as wellbeing, health (including mental health) and child care. Public libraries need to build partnerships to ensure these services and supports can be provided.

Greater Dandenong Libraries

Greater Dandenong Libraries emphasises the importance of improving literacy outcomes as a way of enabling people to better engage effectively in society, develop social networks, access services, participate in education and training and gain meaningful employment. The links between low-level literacy and high levels of unemployment and other social challenges are well understood.

The need for services that meet the English-language and literacy needs of newly arrived settlers is a key factor influencing the libraries' strategic directions. Asylum seekers are not eligible for many government programs, so council services such as libraries are often a critical resource for them.

The following programs and services, outlined in *Libraries without borders: Library strategy 2012–2016*, have been identified as key priorities for Greater Dandenong Libraries in improving literacy outcomes for adults.

Basic English – supporting newly arrived migrants and refugees to acquire the English language skills they need to carry out basic daily functions such as shopping and travel, and communicate with the diverse range of services they are likely to have contact with.

Conversational literacy – assisting residents to develop their English reading and writing skills into confident conversation competencies.

Access to language and literacy programs – supporting residents to understand the range of language and literacy development options available to them through Council and other local service providers.

Computer literacy – supporting adults to acquire basic computer literacy skills so they can access public information, prepare a resume and be ready for work that requires computing skills.

Library staff also identify social literacy – the skills and knowledge needed for living and working in (Australian) society – as an emerging need that needs to be addressed in the community.

THE GREATER DANDENONG COMMUNITY

The City of Greater Dandenong is the most culturally diverse municipality in Victoria. In 2014–15, 2200 recently arrived migrants settled here – the third highest number of any Victorian municipality. Among them were 450 refugees and other humanitarian settlers (City of Greater Dandenong 2015).

Many of these settlers are relatively vulnerable, having limited or no capital accumulation upon their arrival in Australia; limited exposure to spoken or written English; little formal education; and little familiarity with Australian customs and institutions.

Information released by the Federal Department of Citizenship and Border Protection for September 2015 reveals that nearly one in three asylum-seekers in Victoria were living in Greater Dandenong. Almost 80 per cent of asylum seekers are male, and around 60 percent are aged between 18 and 35.

While financial assistance is available to some asylum seekers living in the community, this is paid at a lower rate than standard Centrelink benefits. Asylum seekers are not eligible for many government-funded services. Public libraries are one of the few free resources available to them.

Analysis of findings from the 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, shows that in the City of Greater Dandenong over a quarter of people aged between 15 and 74 have low-level literacy skills (Brown 2009) – the highest proportion of all Victorian municipalities. There is concern that people living in the area do not have the skills required to meet the demands of the growing local job market; new job creation is instead resulting in an influx of workers from other areas.

Strategy

Greater Dandenong Libraries' literacy framework was developed as the major component of *Libraries without borders: Library strategy 2012–2016*.

The framework identifies four broad roles and functions the library can play in supporting improved literacy outcomes in the community.

Information provider – provide residents with information about the range of language and literacy services available across the community – whether delivered by Council, Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), Neighbourhood Houses or other providers.

Service provider – provide community activities, services and programs that support language, literacy and skill development as well as facilitate increased participation in the community.

Advocacy – proactively identify service gaps and advocate to government or other service providers to fill the gap and respond to community need. A priority focus is identifying literacy support gaps for those most vulnerable in the community.

Promotion – promote the importance and value of reading at all ages and in English and other primary languages.

The framework also provides a set of principles that guide and inform how, when and where Greater Dandenong Libraries will play a role in providing literacy support services. The libraries:

- provide literacy support services to English-speaking residents, residents for whom English is not their first language and to residents of all ages
- deliver flexible and responsive literacy support services to meet the changing needs and interests of its residents
- seek to develop a strong partnership-based approach to the provision of literacy services in collaboration and communication with other service providers
- only provide literacy support services that are not provided by other service providers in a competitive environment.

Outreach and engagement

Word-of-mouth has been an effective way of promoting the library to migrant, refugee and asylum-seeker communities. People are often encouraged to attend by friends who are already coming to the library and enjoying its activities and programs. Community agencies also bring people in.

The library is a particularly important resource for asylum seekers. This group includes a large proportion of young men who are keen to learn English and integrate into the Greater Dandenong community.

One of the libraries' outreach activities has been to encourage families into the library through storytime. Parents see this as a welcoming and friendly session that is important for their children's education and development. They particularly welcome the opportunities it offers for them to read with their children. A very large and diverse group of people now attend the program.

Australian-born adults experiencing multigenerational unemployment are amongst those with the highest need for the type of services offered by the library, but are the group least likely to use them. Some come in to use the library's computers but tend not to interact with the library staff or other users, and tend not to attend library programs. There has been less interest in storytime than from other groups.

Library staff say it is hard to reach this group and get the message out that libraries have a lot to offer them. They are less likely to admit they can't read; and a substantial proportion, especially in the older cohort, are not able to use computers. These adults are starting to find they can't do things that others in the community take for granted (for example, use the self-check-out at the supermarket).

Indigenous Australians are also less likely to be involved in the library. Library staff are examining programs, such as Boys on the Bounce and Girls on the Go, that have been run successfully in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and might appeal to young people in the Dandenong region. Though these programs are primarily aimed at children and young people, it is expected that they may also lead to enhanced parental engagement.

Programs

Greater Dandenong Libraries has a clear vision of the types of programs required to meet the needs of adults with low-level literacy skills.

Digital literacy programs. Designed with the skills and capabilities of the patrons in mind, these programs are flexible and extra sessions can be made available as required.

Conversation circles. These programs provide an opportunity to make new friends whilst practising English in a friendly, relaxed and safe environment. Conversation circles are run by volunteers, many of whom are ex-teachers who have grown up in the area and want to give back to their community – and others who are from the city, aware of the issues faced by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and keen to provide friendship and practical support.

Feedback forms are provided to participants at all sessions and an evaluation sheet is also available for staff. These allow the library service to gather information about overall impressions, whether sessions have met participants' needs, and opinions on what worked and what didn't. This feedback is used to modify existing programs and to plan for future programs.

LITERACY SUPPORT

Two literacy positions have recently been established in Greater Dandenong Libraries to provide literacy assessments, referral and support. The language and literacy advisor and the literacy officer are highly experienced staff with specialist skills; they specialise in ESL and adult literacy.

The support offered through the literacy staff includes:

- confidential language and/or literacy assessments
- referral to appropriate English-language and literacy courses based on a full assessment of client needs
- advice for further study and lifelong learning opportunities
- computer assisted language learning
- citizenship information sessions
- job search help
- resume writing help
- assistance with application forms
- advocacy on behalf of clients
- conversation circles.

Assessment and referral is crucial in helping library users with lower-end literacy skills to identify the most appropriate English classes and social support available to them. The libraries' literacy staff stress the importance of feedback loops to ensure that people are not falling through the gaps. There is extensive liaison between the language and literacy staff and the services to which people are referred to make sure that the service is appropriate to users' needs; there is also a strong commitment to ensuring that any hurdles to attendance (such as travel and child care) are dealt with.

Learning Help for Adults is a program designed and delivered by the literacy officer to provide practical support in accessing information and carrying out basic tasks such as applying for a driver's licence or downloading photos from an iPad. Members of the community can make an appointment for a one-on-one session in the morning, or can come to a drop-in session in the afternoon. An interpreter can be made available and can introduce participants to the library and the resources, including online newspapers in various languages, available to them. This is a very flexible service that is responsive to the needs of the people who make contact.

Partnerships

Greater Dandenong Libraries' literacy strategy emphasises developing partnerships and networks to support literacy work. This includes initiating planning across stakeholders to develop a literacy learning plan, and developing partnership agreements with community agencies to enhance access to programs.

There is great diversity in the welfare and community agencies and education providers across Greater Dandenong that offer English-language and literacy programs. This means that there are many opportunities to establish collaborative literacy and learning partnerships, but it also presents challenges in terms of determining who to partner with, how, and for what purpose. At a recent council expo, library staff were able to connect with agency staff and identify appropriate networking groups to join.

The libraries' future partnerships and networks will build on existing relationships within the community sector. For example, the Sisters of Mercy currently run adult literacy classes at Dandenong Library to help asylum seekers use English for greater social inclusion. News of the program has spread by word-of-mouth, and about a hundred young adults have registered for help with English-language skills.

Collection development

The collection at each of the library branches is responsive to the cultural and socioeconomic needs of its community. This means that collections at each library can be quite varied. The library provides access to aspirational materials as well as core resources, which is important in giving library users something to strive for.

Catering for such large language diversity presents a unique challenge in terms of stocking library collections. The library has found that many people from a non-English speaking background want to sustain or develop further skills in their own language(s) and are seeking suitable reading and learning materials.

The library engages with community groups to find out what type of fiction and other material they would like made available. It can be complex navigating the political overlay that can sometimes accompany different communities' positions on what they do and do not want in the library. It can also be difficult to obtain materials in some languages due to unrest in source countries.

Literacy materials and resources are integrated into the library collections. A 'stickers' project is looking at how the library can identify beginner-level books and help library users find the material they need by browsing the shelves.

Staff culture and capability

There are two specialist literacy roles (the language and literacy advisor, and the literacy officer) at Greater Dandenong Libraries, and, more broadly, there is an emphasis on front-of-house services. Staff work out on the library floor and interact with users. They offer information about the services the library has to offer, and answer queries – for example, how to apply for a driver’s licence.

The library service recruits staff who are able to work well with people from different cultural backgrounds and different walks of life, and who are able to communicate well with users.

The libraries commit themselves to diversity by educating staff on the needs of changing communities, and by hiring staff from a variety of cultural and language backgrounds. The diversity of the staff in the library means that users see themselves reflected there. One staff member comments that the libraries are ‘... breaking away from the Anglo model of public libraries and finding an Australian model that reflects our multiculturalism’.

Insights

Refugees and asylum seekers face complex problems.

Some refugees and asylum seekers who use the library are only just coping with daily life. They may be experiencing a range of trauma-related symptoms as a result of persecution; language difficulties due to interrupted schooling in refugee camps and in transit; and settlement challenges due to the complexities inherent in moving to a new country. All of these factors combine to make their participation in learning difficult.

It can be difficult for participants to commit to attending programs and appointments.

Given the complexity of new settlers’ lives, scheduling programs can be difficult. The libraries have found that drop-in programs can work well, as can programs that have a flexible schedule. Staff need to be able to deal with a level of chaos.

There will often be different levels of literacy in the one class. There can be complexities in delivering sessions that include participants with widely different levels of literacy.

Participating can be complicated. The library needs to be aware of the particular barriers women from specific cultural backgrounds may face in coming to the library.

Not everyone has access to a mobile phone. While most Australians take it for granted that everyone has access to a mobile phone, this is not always the case for refugees and asylum seekers. This can impact on the programs run by the library. For example, participants in the email sessions run at the library need to have a mobile phone number to get an email account and password.

Melbourne Library Service

As part of its commitment to promoting adult literacy, Melbourne Library Service (MLS) is focusing on building a literacy and outreach team. This team develops and delivers a range of innovative programs that respond to the varied needs and circumstances of adults in the community who are struggling with reading and writing. These literacy programs are pitched at the foundation level and emphasise learner confidence, motivation and basic skills. Digital literacy programs are seen as an effective way to bring adult learners into the library and support them to develop literacy skills alongside computer literacy.

MLS emphasises that library staff are not adult trainers or teachers. They see libraries' role as building the capability of learners and, where appropriate, creating pathways from library programs and activities to more extensive and structured programs in the adult education sector. MLS is mindful of what others are doing in this space and are careful to avoid duplication of effort.

The literacy team has only recently been established and is still growing, but it is already starting to deliver a variety of creative and engaging reading, educational and cultural programs for adults to encourage literacy development and library usage, and to foster community relations. Experience in the field is encouraging the team to think about the best ways to understand and respond to adult learners' needs.

Outreach is an important component of this work and has a particular focus on responding to the needs and demands of the neighbourhoods in the City of Melbourne that do not have a closely located library branch. MLS is trialling a range of approaches to outreach, including the use of pop-up libraries.

Programs and partnerships

There are many ways adults can develop literacy skills at the library. Literacy learning can occur through specific literacy programs but also through programs and activities that provide incidental learning. An example of this is learning to read in a knitting group.

MLS learning programs are developed and implemented by the literacy and outreach support librarians with the aim of supporting adults to develop confidence in their literacy skills, and of creating groups that can learn together.

There are a significant number of community organisations offering education, training and welfare services across the City of Melbourne. Some are small; at the other end of the spectrum are the central offices of large organisations such as the Smith Family and the Brotherhood of St Laurence. No clear network links these organisations together, which makes it challenging for MLS to communicate and develop relationships with them.

Many potential partners are unaware of the role of libraries. MLS emphasises the need to initiate discussions with them, explain what libraries do and show how they can work collaboratively to address literacy issues – for example, by providing access to technology and spaces for program delivery.

At this stage of its work, MLS has developed strong links through its adult literacy programs to smaller, innovative groups and organisations such as RISE, an ex-detainee, asylum seeker and refugee coalition organisation; and the Choir of Hard Knocks, a choir of homeless and disadvantaged people.

READING CIRCLE AT THE CHOIR OF HARD KNOCKS

The literacy and outreach support librarian has established a reading circle in the Choir of Hard Knocks – a choir whose talented members have come from disadvantaged backgrounds and circumstances. The circle has been developed in conjunction with choir members; and MLS emphasises the importance of directing effort where it is needed, being flexible and listening to participants' needs.

The program is based on reading to the group and discussing their interpretation of the story. One of the hooks for the program is offering a snack for participants.

There are about eight people who participate in the group – all are native English speakers. They tend to be socially isolated, and while some are reasonably literate others struggle to read.

There are many lessons that can be taken from the program.

- It's important that the reading circle is offered in an environment where participants feel comfortable.
- Building trust is at the heart of success. Many of the participants are disadvantaged and fairly reserved – they are nervous about being let down. Partnering with someone at the choir who is familiar to the participants has helped to build trust.
- Establishing consistency in when, where and how the program is delivered can help to build participants' comfort and confidence.
- Breaking down the barriers takes work; it helps if participants feel that staff are open to discussing things and are interested in hearing others' perspectives.
- It is important to create an atmosphere of acceptance and belonging. Some participants may feel they are not smart enough to be part of the group; it is important to find some way of actively including them.
- It is essential to look at how the program is pitched. Participants should not feel they have to analyse books and show 'academic smarts'.

EXTENSIVE READING PROGRAM PARTNERSHIP WITH AMES

Extensive reading is a way of learning language through large amounts of reading. Reading material is at a fairly easy level so that it can be understood without using a dictionary. Reading material is normally for pleasure, information or general understanding; reading is its own reward, and there few or no follow-up exercises. The goal is to create fluency and enjoyment in the reading process.

The extensive reading program at MLS has been developed in consultation with AMES (an organisation providing humanitarian settlement, education, training and employment services for refugees and newly arrived migrants across Victoria) and links closely to AMES's service delivery goals. The library co-facilitates sessions with AMES.

The core aim of the program is to engage people from non-English-speaking backgrounds who have low-level literacy skills, don't read for enjoyment and do not use the library, and turn them into regular visitors by developing their reading skills and instilling a love of reading.

The program includes sustained silent reading, book talk, and reading aloud, and is based on the extensive reading program developed at Georgia State University in the USA (Rodrigo et al. 2007).

A well-equipped library is essential for a successful extensive reading program. The MLS provides materials such as easy reads to support the program, marketing, and an evaluation survey to assess the effectiveness of the program and its design.

The main issue in delivering this program has been accessing appropriate books and resources. The literacy and outreach librarian comments that level 1 easy readers can be too difficult. Participants need reading material that is very easy to read, such as PageTurners (pageturners.prace.vic.edu.au/) – books produced by Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education (PRACE) that are designed specifically for adults learning to read.

Quick Reads from the UK are suitable for better readers, but MLS has had to order texts directly from the USA to make sure that there are materials available for those with more limited reading skills. It takes time to get these texts delivered, catalogued and ready to use.

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE RISE ADVOCACY GROUP

MLS has partnered with the RISE advocacy group, which works with refugees, survivors and ex-detainees, to encourage members to join the MLS libraries.

RISE was officially launched in March 2010, and is the first welfare and advocacy organisation in Australia governed entirely by refugees, asylum seekers and ex-detainees. It was established to increase social participation and help refugees to build new lives, by providing advice, engaging in community development, enhancing opportunity and campaigning for refugee and asylum seeker rights.

There are a number of barriers to this group engaging with the library:

- Refugees and asylum seekers typically don't know what a library is.
- They are not aware of the benefits of libraries. In their own countries they may have had experience of libraries that focus only on learning and academic pursuits.
- Some don't have a permanent address, which makes it hard to join some libraries.
- They may be nervous about coming to the library. The membership process can put them off.

OTHER PROGRAMS

MLS also provides or is piloting programs that feature built-in literacy development.

English conversation groups. These enormously popular programs are now delivered by volunteers, and the demand for more sessions is high.

Basic introductions to digital literacy. Sessions are mainly for older people and focus on the use of iPads.

Pronunciation group. This group caters for adults from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Human library program. Users can come in to the library and talk to someone for 15 minutes on a set theme.

Staff culture and capability

The MLS literacy team has a literacy and outreach support team leader, two literacy and outreach support librarians, an ESL librarian and a number of technical and support staff.

When the team started about two years ago the literacy role in public libraries hardly existed. The management team at MLS had to consider the type of staff needed for this work, what their roles should be, and the types of qualifications and attributes required. It was decided that team members needed to be able to:

- lead library literacy services in new and exciting directions
- assess community interests and needs, and plan and deliver services accordingly
- collaborate with the library team and other key organisations in planning and implementing programs
- develop and maintain internal and external relationships, partnerships and networks.

MLS aimed to recruit staff that are dynamic and forward-thinking – with experience in implementing innovative literacy and digital technology training for users of all ages and from a wide variety of cultural, economic, social and educational backgrounds.

The library service notes that it has attracted high-quality staff to its literacy team. These staff bring a creative approach to developing programs and partnerships, are interested in looking at new ways of doing things and are committed to providing good value for the community.

LITERACY AND OUTREACH TEAM ROLES

The role of the team leader has been to collaborate with the wider library team and key community organisations to plan and implement programs and projects that meet the literacy needs of the City of Melbourne community.

The aim of the team is to develop and grow Melbourne Library Service's lifelong learning and literacy initiatives, with a focus on foundation literacy to support computer-skill development. One outcome the team is working towards is breaking down the digital divide in the community.

The adult literacy and outreach support librarians are expected to report on the needs and demand for library outreach services in the various neighbourhoods within the City of Melbourne, and plan, develop and provide advice on what programs and activities are required.

Volunteers

Melbourne City Council has an established volunteer network. Council departments can draw on this network and be confident that appropriate processes, such as police checks, have been followed. Libraries apply their own lens to this process and ensure that volunteers working with the library comply with ALIA guidelines and are not doing library work.

There is an abundance of people who are keen to volunteer with MLS as a way of giving back to their community. There is a carefully structured process for recruiting and managing volunteers who support library programs. The libraries are able to select the volunteers most appropriate to their needs. Training is provided, and there is a manual to guide their work.

Volunteers work in a number of literacy programs, including the English conversation groups and Literacy Buddies program. MLS is careful in how it matches volunteers and adult learners. They are keen that this is a positive experience for both parties so they ensure introductions are made and checks and balances are put in place. The volunteers are trained to support learners, and understand the 'do's and don'ts' of their role.

Collection development

MLS did initially have an adult literacy collection, but it was absorbed into the ESL collection because the libraries were not running adult literacy programs that required access to these resources.

Funding has now been allocated to develop collections to support the establishment of new adult literacy programs. The libraries will monitor the value of this material in the context of these programs and for end-users.

The ESL collection, which is mainly held at the City Library, is extensively used, and there is very high demand for resources such as Road to IELTS.

Insights

Improving adult literacy is a long game. Results are not guaranteed, and they are hard won. At MLS many of the adults participating in programs are highly vulnerable and may not regularly attend. Outreach requires time and dedication, as many of the groups needing support do not typically spend time in the library.

MLS's advice to other libraries is to go slow. They note that the need for literacy support in the community is overwhelming and suggest that libraries be slow and methodical in their approach. This means taking time to design and develop programs and activities that are customised to the needs of specific groups of learners, evaluating as you go and modifying programs on the basis of feedback. In particular, MLS advises that staff should take care not to make assumptions about what people need, and should also avoid duplicating what other agencies are already doing.

The libraries are mindful that they are working with vulnerable people and have a duty of care for them. They ensure the environment in which learning takes place is as safe as possible.

Libraries need to be flexible and consider how they can do things in a way that progresses the adult literacy agenda while meeting council guidelines and obligations.

Sustainability is crucial. Libraries' literacy work tackles a range of highly complex intergenerational issues that are often associated with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. Many of the people seeking help have been let down by community services and organisations – which are often strapped for funding and have had to discontinue support. While short-term funding may allow libraries to offer additional activities, this needs to be in the context of sustainable funding that builds adult literacy into the ongoing service offering.

Marketing what they are doing in the adult literacy space is a challenge for the literacy and outreach team. This is currently under consideration with a focus on use of visual presentation.

Moonee Valley Libraries – Avondale Heights Library and Learning Centre

Avondale Heights Library and Learning Centre opened in September 2010, incorporating the former Milleara shopfront library. It is a spacious, modern building with a strong emphasis on information technology. The centre has training rooms equipped with the latest technology, a public internet computer room, and wifi throughout. Partnerships are a key feature of the centre, with several organisations, including U3A and Kangan Institute, using the training rooms to deliver their programs.

The Library and Learning Centre sits within the Avondale Heights Community Precinct, on a site that was formerly the Kangan Institute of TAFE campus. As well as the Library and Learning Centre, the precinct currently includes an early years centre and a stadium/gymnasium. Further development is planned in a number of stages, subject to funding. In the longer term it is anticipated that the precinct will provide a piazza that functions as a civic gathering space and community hub, a cafe/kiosk to foster informal community gatherings, and an outdoor youth space providing outdoor recreational opportunities.

Development of the Avondale Heights Library and Learning Centre has provided an opportunity to reconsider the learning role that libraries play within Moonee Valley. As a result there has been a significant increase in the variety and scope of informal programs and formal courses offered; and a new range of tasks for library staff in providing learning-centre support and program delivery.

The activities of the centre are based on lifelong learning, skills development and community engagement. There is an emphasis on responding to community needs; fostering partnerships that enable the facility to grow and evolve; and contributing to the social, cultural and economic fabric of the community.

STRATEGY

The *Library and learning strategy 2012–16*, developed through consultation with the Moonee Valley community, provides a comprehensive framework to guide library services and learning-program development. It is designed to ensure Moonee Valley Libraries meet the needs of residents well into the future.

The strategy recognises the role of libraries in supporting lifelong informal learning, formal education and pathways to qualifications and employment. It:

- emphasises the importance of designing programs to attract diverse audiences, including youth, new residents, people with English as an additional language and those who might otherwise feel socially isolated
- acknowledges the library's role in supporting informal learning by providing facilities, resources, activities and expert guidance
- recognises the need for an active approach to forming partnerships that support the delivery of programs, events and activities and introduce new groups to the library service.

PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS

The community in Avondale Heights is culturally and linguistically diverse. Of all the districts within the City of Moonee Valley, it has the largest number (4,617) and proportion (42%) of residents born overseas, and a lower proportion of residents who speak English at home (ABS 2011).

In response to needs within the community, the first learning partnership developed at the Library and Learning Centre focuses on assisting residents to learn English and practice their English conversation skills.

There were key questions the library needed to ask in developing this program and the partnerships vital to supporting it.

- How can the needs of the community be best met?
- What types of classes are required by the community? Do they need an informal English conversation skills class, or a certificate-level course?
- Does the library have the skills and the capacity to deliver the program, or does it need to partner with an external provider for this purpose?
- Are there training providers with appropriate experience in delivering education to the community?
- Who is already delivering something similar?
- What value can this program bring to partners? (For some training providers the value might be in the venue and a guaranteed market; for others it might be a means of raising their profile within the community.)
- What responsibilities will the partners and the library have in relation to the program?

An initial 20-week pilot program was provided in conjunction with Farnham Street Neighbourhood Learning Centre (FSNLC), an existing library partner that had been providing education and social support programs to the community for over 30 years.

FSNLC was engaged to deliver a two-hour English conversation class on the library's behalf and provide English-language assessments so as to enable participants' access to other programs delivered by FSNLC. FSNLC delivered the pilot program at an agreed cost.

This represented a change in the way the library partnered with FSNLC. The partnership to that point had largely been the library providing the training room and FSNLC running courses of its own choosing.

The pilot was successful and in 2012 a weekly two-hour English conversation skills class was delivered through a partnership arrangement. As part of this arrangement the library provides the room and centre support and FSNLC provides an in-kind contribution through a tutor to facilitate the class. The partnership has now expanded and in 2016 four weekly English conversation skills classes will be provided across three library locations within Moonee Valley Libraries.

LESSONS

There are several lessons from the development and delivery of English conversation classes at the Avondale Heights Library and Learning Centre.

Be clear about what you want to achieve.

Define community needs and have a clear understanding of the program requirements.

Pilot new ideas. Piloting a program can be useful as it gives partners the opportunity to see the potential value of their involvement in the program.

Establish strategic partnerships. This has been crucial to the success of the centre.

Develop a partnership framework. Defining the principles, requirements, opportunities and benefits of partnering can help guide decisions about who to partner with and how to partner with them.

Wyndham City Libraries

‘Wyndham’s vision is to be a socially inclusive city with high levels of employment. This is fundamental in ensuring a prosperous future for the people of Wyndham. Learning is a key for realising this vision ...’

– Wyndham learning community strategy 2014–2017

Wyndham City Libraries are operated by Wyndham City Council, to the west of Melbourne. The Libraries and Community Learning department sits within the Directorate of Community Development. There are five service locations, including two that are co-located within community learning centres.

Wyndham Council has a substantial history of supporting community learning; its most recent strategy, developed in 2014, provides a framework for continued improvement of learning outcomes across the City. This strategy highlights the links between literacy and learning and social cohesion and employment, and marks a commitment by Council to work collaboratively with community service and education providers to support learning across all life stages.

Key challenges identified for Wyndham City Libraries include:

- improving CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) collections in response to changing demographics
- planning and providing library infrastructure and services in a rapidly growing city
- recruiting and developing staff to meet the evolving needs of the community.

THE CITY OF WYNDHAM

The City of Wyndham is a fast-changing community with a fast-growing population and increasing cultural diversity.

Wyndham is experiencing growth across all age groups, but particularly in the groups of people aged 25 to 49. Compared to greater Melbourne and Victoria, Wyndham has proportionally and significantly more people in the birth to 12 age group and significantly fewer people in the 60-plus age group (ABS 2011).

Just over one-third of the population is born overseas, and about one-quarter are from countries where English is not the primary language. The top five languages spoken by CALD groups in Wyndham are Hindi, Italian, Mandarin, Arabic and Punjabi (ABS 2011). Wyndham is also becoming home to many newly emerging CALD groups, including the Karen and people from countries in the Horn of Africa.

The community is facing some difficult social and economic challenges associated with its new and expanding population. These are exacerbated by closures of large manufacturers – Toyota and Altona cannery close by – that had provided continued employment for Wyndham residents. Low levels of literacy in the community continue to raise questions about the ability of local residents to fill future jobs in the area.

Strategy

The strategic context for Wyndham City Libraries adult literacy programs and activities is provided through the *Wyndham learning community strategy 2014–2017*, which was produced by the Wyndham Learning Community Forum, a network of 44 community learning providers.

The learning strategy sets out how Council will meet its learning goals over the next few years in partnership with the wide range of organisations in Wyndham that provide informal and formal learning activities and courses.

This strategy's purpose is to provide learning opportunities for everyone in the community, wherever they are located and at whatever age they may be. The outcomes being sought include an increase in aspirations for learning by Wyndham residents and an increased awareness of learning opportunities. In particular, the strategy aims to establish ways to assist disadvantaged and culturally and linguistically diverse communities navigate the learning opportunities available.

Wyndham City Libraries assumed a lead role in developing the strategy through the manager, who has charge of libraries as well as community learning. The library is overseeing implementation of the strategy through a newly established Coordinator of Community Learning position.

Outreach and engagement

Engagement with the library is an important first step in supporting people to develop their literacy and English-language skills. The aim of Wyndham City Libraries' outreach program is to connect people in the community to sessions in the library and build up their trust before broaching issues of literacy and reading.

Understanding more about the community and the needs of specific groups influences the way this work is undertaken. Through regular contact with groups throughout the community, library staff are made aware of many of these needs – for example, the needs of a growing number of non-English speaking migrant women who come to Australia with their husbands and who find themselves isolated at home. They are keen to find out more.

During Cultural Diversity Week the library ran a Bollywood

Night. This attracted a number of Indian families in which the men had some English-language skills but the women did not. These women are now starting to come along to conversation groups at the libraries, which provides opportunities to mix with other people and raises their awareness of other activities happening in the community.

The arrival of myGov as a major way of accessing Commonwealth Government services and Centrelink payments is bringing many new users with low literacy proficiency into the library for support accessing information and completing online applications. While this is increasing the workload of staff, it has the benefit of getting 'hard to reach' people through the library doors.

Co-location with community centres brings libraries into proximity to other high-use services, which is also helping to bring new people to the library through other high-use services in the centres.

Over the past three years the library service has conducted a survey at the new co-located centres to gather qualitative data on whether the centres have made a difference to the communities they are located within. The survey results show that the co-located model is highly regarded and valued.

Programs

An adult programs and services strategic framework supports the Wyndham learning strategy and explores the strengths and weaknesses of the library service provision; identifies future trends and stakeholders; and makes recommendations for actions across the library service. It was informed by the extensive community consultation carried out as part of the Wyndham 2040 project, and by findings from community consultations undertaken at each of the five library branches in 2015.

The findings from the consultations identified the need for adult programs and services across a range of areas. Within the dynamic learning

area, the following programs were included:

- job and study programs
- sustainable living workshops
- IT workshops and training
- language cafes
- living books
- ESL computer classes.

These programs were first delivered in early 2016 and will continue until at least December 2017.

Appointment of a team leader for adult programs and services has given an important boost to the development of adult programs and activities. In addition, the introduction of RFID and self-serve technologies has enabled staff to reduce the number of transactional tasks they undertake and focus more on value-added tasks, such as program delivery (Wyndham City Libraries 2013). There are a variety of programs to support members of the community in developing their literacy, English-language and job search skills.

Digital literacy. Parents and grandparents with very low literacy skills (those who are literate in their own language and those who have very limited literacy in their own language) are finding digital literacy programs and storytime are good ways to learn English.

Job and study programs. Basic classes and resources are available to the community to enhance their employment skills and to support lifelong learning. Sessions include interview techniques and practice sessions, psychometric testing and resume writing. Job search resources are provided.

IT classes. A range of free programs are provided for adults to learn to use computers and digital devices.

IT workshops and training. This program expands on the IT classes to offer training sessions in Skype, Android and Windows 10.

Language cafes. Informal sessions provide an opportunity for CALD community members to practice their English speaking skills.

Partnerships

The Wyndham Learning Community Forum, which has 44 community learning providers as members, provides significant opportunities for the library to form strategic links with local groups working in the adult literacy field. The group is outward facing and interested in working together. Private industry is also committing to the activities of the forum, with a special interest in supporting training and re-training.

Many organisations in the forum are well established and have a good understanding of community needs and of gaps in services currently available. Organisations such as the Wyndham Community Education Centre bring to the library extensive knowledge and experience of working with people who have low-level literacy and English-language proficiency.

Co-location of libraries within community learning centres has provided opportunities to connect with a wider group of agencies. These centres have permanent residents, such as kindergartens and Maternal & Child Health services, and space available for hire by community groups and organisations. Interaction at the centres enables organisations to identify the synergies in their work and opportunities to work together. For example, at Wyndham Vale there is a significant demand for computer training; libraries are able to offer computer basics while other groups focus on more advanced training.

Collection development

Wyndham City Libraries has a strong collection of adult reader development and literacy support materials. This includes an ESL collection. However, library staff note that people with the lowest literacy levels are unlikely to borrow from this collection, as they need a higher level of skill to borrow and read independently. If this group is to get value from the collection it needs to be used as part of the programs they are attending.

Insights

Funding and continuity. The *Wyndham learning community strategy 2014–2017* reflects the many things that the community wants to achieve. It is ambitious, and there is a strong commitment to making it work. It provides a structure for community service and education providers to work within and helps identify opportunities for collaboration. However, the strategy does not provide specific funding for the initiatives identified, and this may lead to some of them stalling. Initiatives may also find it hard to survive staff turnover, organisational restructure and change of focus.

Responsive programming. A growing population, its changing composition, and changing community expectations necessitates the ongoing review of library service delivery and accessibility. As the representation of cultural groups changes, programs need to change. For example, what one group wants from the IT program can be quite different from what others want – especially when different age cohorts are involved.

People with low-level literacy are not a homogenous group and there can be tensions between those who are looking to develop literacy skills for work and those who need skills for social inclusion and everyday activities.

Working with volunteers. Programs in the library use volunteers with varying levels of success. The Council volunteer program never has a shortage of people offering their time, but the library recognises it needs to develop its skills in working with volunteers.

Yarra Plenty Regional Library

Yarra Plenty Regional Library (YPRL) serves about 400,000 people over three municipalities in the northeast of Melbourne. The City of Whittlesea is home to migrants from over 140 countries and is a fast-growing area of Melbourne; in the City of Banyule there are affluent residential areas as well as a very significant Somali community; and green-wedge Nillumbik Shire includes urban areas and remote rural properties (MacKenzie 2015).

YPRL sees a key role for its libraries in providing 'accessible educational opportunities that allow groups and individuals to learn, update and maintain 21st Century skills' (YPRL 2015). Adult literacy programs and activities at YPRL focus on supporting adults users to develop their English-language, reading and writing skills to improve wellbeing and confidence and, where appropriate, to enable people to take the next steps into further learning through community-based providers, including Learn Local organisations. Libraries can provide introductory sessions in an informal environment and then connect participants to other services.

YARRA PLENTY REGIONAL LIBRARY COMMUNITIES

YPRL works with very different communities and has to be flexible in its response to the particular needs of each.

In Whittlesea the service has identified a need for English-language literacy assistance, including services for parents and carers who need help to support literacy development in their children; this has brought to life to a number of bilingual storytime programs. In addition, the City of Whittlesea is one of the fastest growing municipalities in Australia, with an average of 63 babies born every week (City of Whittlesea 2016). Early years services therefore represent a significant proportion of YPRL's business in this local government area, focussing predominantly on early literacy capacity-building activities for parents and caregivers.

The City of Banyule encompasses highly disparate localities, ranging from Heidelberg West, which experiences high levels of social and economic disadvantage (ABS 2011), to the comparatively advantaged suburbs of Eaglemont and Ivanhoe East. Living in some cases side by side are newly arrived residents receiving a supported income and

families in multimillion-dollar properties. Reflecting this disparity, weekly English conversation groups assisting new migrants can be found in the same branch as a range of book groups discussing the latest Miles Franklin nominees.

YPRL is part of the Banyule Literacy Alliance, which works in partnership with a range of local agencies to emphasise the importance of oral storytelling and the use of visuals to encourage literacy development.

In Nillumbik Shire, a local government area with comparatively low population density, one of the main challenges for YPRL is accessing geographically isolated residents. The mobile library service visits a range of rural communities, and YPRL staff liaise regularly with Shire staff to identify new opportunities for outreach services. As an ageing population with a higher than average median age and a smaller than average number of children under the age of four, Nillumbik Shire also offers the library service a number of opportunities in the areas of volunteering, digital literacy and brain health.

Strategy

The work of the YPRL takes place within the context of strategies developed at two of the member councils:

- the *City of Whittlesea municipal lifelong learning strategy and action plan 2013–2016*, which guides Council in developing a strong and positive learning culture within the City of Whittlesea and improving learning outcomes for community members
- Nillumbik's *Positive ageing strategy 2013–2018*, which emphasises the importance for older adults of being able to participate in and contribute to the community.

Under the *Learning strategic framework 2015–2020*, the library service aims to work with partners to cultivate a fluid, responsive learning community that facilitates opportunities for collaborative and continuous education. The framework provides a five-year plan to guide development of YPRL learning programs; it also recognises that public libraries are informal learning providers and that programs delivered at the library can lead to more formal educational pathways and to other learning providers in the community.

The framework focuses on three key areas:

- developing programs and opportunities to foster and encourage reading and literacy
- developing and facilitating learning programs consistent with evolving community needs
- developing and promoting learning activities that complement the offerings of other learning providers and continue to develop strong relationships with them.

YPRL recognises the potential for a more formal and planned approach to adult literacy through a literacy strategy. It is currently looking at how to incorporate adult literacy into learning in the library, and is considering the interconnection of different literacies.

Outreach and engagement

‘The challenge is how to reach out to special groups in the community to enhance reading and literacy and to encourage people of all abilities to use their local library by offering them appropriate programs.’

– Learning strategic framework 2015–2020

Outreach programs include a number of activities, including community festivals and visits to schools and aged care facilities, that provide opportunities to talk to adults about what the library does. YPRL branches have varying capacity (in terms of staff time and physical space) to do this work. Some have developed their own branch-based programs; others have not had the resources to do this.

Programs

The emphasis of YPRL adult literacy programs is on providing a bridge to literacy through other interests.

YPRL has a reading and literacy coordinator who is responsible for regional reading and literacy programs for children, youth and adults; and about nine reading coordinators, who are responsible for, amongst other things, adult literacy. YPRL staff emphasise that they support adult literacy in all that they do, and take an inclusive approach to literacy skills development.

DIGITAL LITERACY PROGRAMS

There has been an increasing demand for digital literacy training, especially from older people. This is largely due to people wanting to use their iPad, or to use their iPhone to do more than just make a call.

Digital literacy programs are proving an engaging way to develop library users' print literacy skills. Strong reading and writing skills underpin the capacity to use technology in many aspects of work and daily life. To be digitally literate not only requires users to be technically savvy but also literate, so learning digital skills and developing reading skills can go hand in hand. One example of this at YPRL is the Seniors Connect program. Seniors learn to use iPads, gaining basic technology skills so that they can better access government services and connect and communicate with friends and family.

LIVE READS ON THE ROAD

Storytime programs at the library are traditionally aimed at babies, children and their parents; and adult reading programs are traditionally aimed at committed readers. Now there are reading programs for adults who have limited literacy proficiency.

Live Reads on the Road is one of these programs. It employs storytelling as a way to reach out to isolated and vulnerable

adults who are reluctant or disengaged readers and unlikely to visit their local library. It introduces these adults to the joy of reading through the connectedness of storytelling.

Live Reads on the Road addresses a number of key challenges:

- low levels of adult literacy
- social isolation and its effects on wellbeing
- inequitable access to books and reading
- limited opportunities to learn how to read for pleasure
- the stigma of low-level literacy.

The program, which was launched in 2014, involves partnering with community organisations such as Olympic Adult Education and Banyule Community Health to take storytellers out to people attending programs at their venues. Storytimes are held monthly, rotating through each municipality with celebrity storytellers and library staff conducting the sessions. Community members attending these storytimes are encouraged to join the library service.

The library exploits the principles of bibliotherapy (reading specific texts for therapeutic benefit) and reader development in delivering this program, and provides participants with suggestions for good reads and 'what to read next'. After the sessions, libraries have found that community members were motivated to talk about the stories they had heard.

Although the sessions have generally attracted good numbers of people – both library users and non-users – not all were well attended, and they have been discontinued in one of the council areas.

Several challenges arose in the course of developing and delivering the Live Reads on the Road program.

Sustainability. Employing celebrity storytellers has proven expensive and cannot be sustained in the longer term.

Staff confidence. A component of staff training was included in the program but did not eventuate. Provision of this type of training may encourage library staff to feel more confident in understanding adults with literacy challenges.

Ownership of the project. Local government area (LGA) staff were confused about the intent of the project and this led to some loss of ownership. The collaboration between LGAs was not strategic.

Partnerships and communication. It was sometimes difficult to establish partnerships with community organisations and to identify suitable times to run the sessions.

LANGUAGE CAFES

YPRL hosts ESL and community language circles for people to practice their language skills. These are extremely valuable for new residents who have used their allocated Adult Migrant English Program classes and need additional support, and there is significant demand. These informal programs can also provide a pathway to classes run by community providers such as Neighbourhood Houses.

At some YPRL branches the language cafes are delivered by volunteers, who include retired teachers and other professionals. At branches that do not have the same access to available volunteers, the program is run by library staff. The end result is that the program is slightly different across branches and in some cases is not as structured as YPRL would like.

THE READING ROVER

Public libraries contribute to improving intergenerational literacy through storytime programs that actively engage young children in learning but also model reading behaviours to the children's parents, grandparents and carers.

Reading Rover is a bookmobile inspired by the Columbus Metropolitan Libraries' Reading Corps. It delivers early

and pre-literacy services and programs to 'hard to reach' families and vulnerable children. The program supports parents to read with their children and offers access to a huge range of pre-literacy-level books for parents to borrow. The emphasis is on what parents and caregivers can do at home. Sessions are designed to be simple and fun, and families are encouraged to connect with the library and to attend storytimes (MacKenzie 2015).

LALOR ESL BOOK GROUP

The ESL Book Group is a pilot program run at Lalor libraries. It is a very flexible program that aims to respond to participants' needs and offer pathways and progression to further learning. The library has not made any assumptions about how it should be run, but participants have different preferences – some want to practice reading while others want to develop their English-language skills.

Collection development

YPRL's resources for literacy and English-language learning sit together within the library to make access easier for library users. Staff are made aware of the collections and are able to promote them; and care is taken to display these materials in an attractive way.

The adult ESL and literacy collections at YPRL include a wide selection of fiction and nonfiction materials, including simplified books (Quick Read Books) that are written in clear language and include images to help the reader understand the text, and resources to help improve writing and grammar. There is a big demand for these resources. While library users might previously have just borrowed a DVD, librarians are now seeing that they are likely to also borrow a Quick Read book.

Development, maintenance and promotion of the literacy and ESL collections at YPRL are informed by:

- an understanding of the needs of users
- an emphasis on keeping the materials up-to-date
- a requirement to ensure easy access to the resources
- the aim of ensuring that patrons feel comfortable borrowing from the collection.

YPRL is looking to grow its adult literacy and ESL collection and acquire quality resources that will better meet the needs of the target groups. Staff are investigating what materials are available and are in particular looking for Australian resources.

Staff are also interested in how they might use their maker space to work with adult learners to produce their own stories as easy reads that can then be shared with other library users.

Insights

YPRL staff are good at recognising community needs and they understand the importance of providing services that are relevant to the community.

In disadvantaged areas like Lalor and Thomastown the library provides a point of access to lifelong learning and is able to pique learners' interests by introducing them to new technologies, tools and skills. For example, one program entices paper artists to explore drawing in the digital sphere; another offers Greek-speaking residents the chance to find out about online banking and shopping; and the Textile and Crafts Makerspace at Thomastown offers access to new tools, such as a Scan 'n' Cut printer, to support users' trades and hobbies.

As programs are implemented and their value assessed, YPRL staff have identified some significant challenges and opportunities for advancing this work.

Learning styles. It's important to be aware of the different ways people learn, and to package programs with other support.

Design and promotion. Ensure programs are well designed, coordinated and marketed. This requires a level of sophistication in the skills base of the staff.

Evolving programs. Programs can grow and change and lead to entirely new programs. The Tea and Tech group, for example, grew out of the Language Cafe. It is run by participants themselves in Mandarin and focuses on digital literacy.

Appropriate levels of difficulty. Pitch the material, classes and sessions at the right level. In some groups people with less developed skills can feel intimidated by people who are more advanced. One of the YPRL branches struggled with the English conversation classes run by the Neighbourhood House in the library, as people who came along found it too advanced.

Space. Partners are often looking for space to use; some libraries, such as Lalor, do not have the capacity to offer this.

Partnerships. At the branch level it can be challenging to identify and form partnerships that are relevant to the library. One question is whether YPRL should form links to partners at a strategic rather than a branch level.

Demand for digital assistance. It is challenging to meet the demand for digital literacy support, particularly since the advent of myGov. There are a large number of library users now seeking help to use this service and access similar sites to find information and complete registration and application forms.

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