LIBRARIES/BUILDING/COMMUNITIES

Connecting with the Community
Part E: Vulnerable learners

This report is one of five sections of the full **Connecting with the Community** report. The full report is available from the State Library of Victoria website: **www.slv.vic.gov.au**

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The original *Libraries Building Communities* reports were published in 2005. The reports presented the findings of the first comprehensive Australian study of the value public libraries add to their communities. The study was designed to provide information that would assist in the planning of public library services and in advocacy efforts on behalf of public libraries. It included all 44 public library services in Victoria and drew on the views of nearly 10,000 Victorians. There are four reports with an *Executive Summary*:

- Report One: *Setting the Scene* covers the concept of community building, the Victorian Government's policy agenda, the Victorian public library network, project methodology and relevant research.
- Report Two: *Logging the Benefits* outlines community views on the role and benefits of public libraries.
- Report Three: *Bridging the Gaps* provides socio-demographic profiles of library users and non-users and strategies of bridging the perceived gaps in public library service delivery.
- Report Four: *Showcasing the Best* gives over thirty examples of innovation and excellence in Victorian public libraries.

In 2006, the research continued with the *Libraries Building Communities* Library User Census and Survey Project and publication of a further two reports from this research:

- Report One: *Statewide Analysis and Comparisons*
- Report Two: *Library Services Data and Reports*

In 2007, further qualitative research was undertaken with five groups identified in the 2005 reports as 'hard to reach' for public libraries: indigenous Australians; disadvantaged young people; Horn of Africa communities; low income families; and, vulnerable learners. The outcomes of this research and ideas for engaging these groups are contained in the *Connecting with the Community* report.

In 2007, a second volume of case studies of some of the many innovative and excellent programs offered by Victorian public libraries that strengthen their communities was compiled. These are published in *Libraries Building Communities* Report Four: *Showcasing the Best, Volume 2*.

All publicly available reports related to the *Libraries Building Communities* project are available via the State Library of Victoria website: **www.slv.vic.gov.au**

Contents

Introduction

The concern is that, among the 40% not using [public] libraries, there are people who are hard to reach but who would benefit enormously from what the library has to offer ... data indicates that about 13% of Victorians fall into this category.

STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA 2005B, P. 6

Libraries Building Communities (LBC) is a Statewide Public Library Development Project of the Library Board of Victoria undertaken through the State Library of Victoria and the Victorian public library network. Its aim is to convey to decision makers, and others, the breadth, depth and potential impact of the modern public library on the whole community.

LBC research shows that about 60% of Victorians use public library services. Of the remainder, a significant proportion give 'lifestyle' reasons for not using the library. A smaller proportion, representing about 13% of Victorians, have potentially much to gain from using library services but face considerable barriers in accessing and using these services. This group includes both people from marginalised social groups whose access to information and technology is severely limited, and people who face special difficulties in using the library (e.g. those who are housebound).

To provide a clearer picture of these 'hard-to-reach' groups, the Connecting with the Community research project has collected qualitative information about their characteristics and barriers to participation. The project report also suggests practical strategies and recommendations for meeting the specific needs of these groups.

Through discussion with the LBC Workgroup, comprising representatives of the State Library of Victoria and Victoria's public library services, the Connecting with the Community project chose to research five target groups within the population:

• Indigenous Australians

• Disadvantaged young people

• Horn of Africa communities

• Low-income families

• Vulnerable learners

The research does not suggest that all members of these population groups face barriers in accessing and using public library services. Some people within these groups are regular and passionate library users. Nor does the research suggest that these groups fully account for the 13% of Victorians who may be marginalised in their

access to information. Other groups might have been chosen.

These groups were selected on the basis that they represented populations who were thought to significantly underuse available library services. The more that public libraries know about the nature of these groups – their information needs, the factors that influence their access of information, the examples of library programs implemented in Victoria, Australia and overseas – the greater the opportunity for existing library services to be enhanced to better meet the needs of all members of the community. It is hoped that in time the proportion of Victorians who have much to gain from using library services but face barriers in accessing and using these services might no longer be 13%, but 10% or 5%, or even lower.

Research methods

I&J Management Services has worked with the State Library of Victoria and the Victorian public library network on several aspects of the Libraries Building Communities project. In 2007, it was engaged to undertake the Connecting with the Community research project.

Selection of target groups

In planning the research, the LBC Workgroup discussed potential criteria for selection of the hard-to-reach target groups that would be the focus of the project. Five broad criteria were thought to balance the arguments for and against targeting different population groups:

- **Universality** – The population target group and the findings related to that target group are relevant to the majority of Victorian public libraries.

- **Real benefits** – The target group is likely to be interested in and benefit from access to public library services.

- **Policy connectedness** – The target group corresponds with groups identified as socially excluded and identified as target groups in Commonwealth, state and local government policy statements.

- **Research efficiency** – The target group is not the subject of similar research already being done in the public library system, thereby avoiding duplication of effort.

- **Coverage** – The target group should represent a significant proportion of the 13% of Victorians in the hard-to-reach group.

Applying these criteria and taking in to account the knowledge, experience and input of the LBC Workgroup, it was agreed that the research would focus on the following hard-to-reach target groups:

- **Indigenous Australians** – Previous LBC research and library data indicates that Indigenous Australians are generally not frequent users of library services. However, the information, literacy, educational and computer services available through public libraries are of benefit to Indigenous Australians of all age groups, including people living in rural and urban communities. Libraries could also play a role in developing and maintaining Indigenous language and cultural records.

- **Disadvantaged young people** – This target group includes teenagers and young people who have left school early, those who are homeless or at risk of being made homeless, those in families where parents are unemployed, and young people facing other forms of social and/or economic disadvantage.

- **Horn of Africa communities** – Humanitarian and refugee migration programs have seen a significant influx in Victoria over recent years of migrants from Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti. Aside from being a target group of interest in their own right, it was thought the issues related to library access and use by this group might be shared by other and future emerging migrant communities.

- **Low-income families with dependent children** – A range of research reports, such as *Dropping off the Edge* (Vinson 2007), has identified families with children living in economically disadvantaged areas as facing difficulties in accessing community services that could assist their economic, educational, health

and social wellbeing. This target group includes sole parents and other families dependent on Centrelink benefits.

- **Vulnerable learners** – The skills needed in the twenty-first century workplace differ from those possessed by many older workers, long-term unemployed and people with low-level skills making the transition back to employment and learning. For many men aged over 45, women without an employment history, and people with disabilities, accessing further education and acquiring information and computer skills is critical to their capacity to participate in the workforce.

Other groups that were considered by the LBC Workgroup for attention in this research included some from broad population groups such as seniors, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, people living in rural communities, the unemployed and people with disabilities, as well as some from more specific population groups such as homeless people, housebound people, itinerant travellers and people in detention. It was thought that subject to the findings from the five selected target groups, future research might be undertaken with these or other relevant population groups.

It was also understood that both the five target groups and those groups not included in the Connecting with the Community research project are not mutually exclusive, and that there is overlap between groups (e.g. disadvantaged young people and low-income families; vulnerable learners and the unemployed). This makes it possible to develop some understanding about library use and needs among groups not targeted by this research.

Research activities

The Connecting with the Community research project comprised three stages. The first was the process outlined above, in which the LBC Workgroup selected five groups who might benefit from greater access to and use of public library services. In addition to the selection of

these target groups, the LBC Workgroup also decided on five locations in Victoria to concentrate the field-based research activities. These were chosen as areas where it was known that library users and non-users from the respective target groups lived and might be engaged to participate in the research. The following five locations covered metropolitan, urban fringe and regional areas:

- Indigenous Australians – Shepparton.

- Disadvantaged young people – northern suburbs of Melbourne (e.g. Reservoir, Darebin).

- Horn of Africa communities – western suburbs of Melbourne (e.g. Footscray, St Albans).

- Low-income families – Hastings.

- Vulnerable learners – northern suburbs of Geelong (e.g. Corio, Norlane).

The second stage of the research involved collection of information about the factors that influence the library use of people from each target group. In effect, the research was conducted as five parallel mini-research projects, each having three distinct components.

1. **Literature review** – This involved a short, focused review of Australian and international literature to identify relevant research into the library use of these target groups, as well as examples of practical strategies implemented by libraries to encourage greater access to and use of library services by the target groups.

2. **Interviews with community stakeholders** – For each target group, this involved telephone or face-to-face interviews with a small number of stakeholders from agencies engaged in providing community support to the target group. Across the five areas these stakeholders included local government officers, youth workers, social workers, community leaders, community workers from migrant resource centres, representatives from community educational providers, staff at neighbourhood houses and community centres, and personnel from the Department of Human Services' Neighbourhood Renewal projects in relevant locations (e.g. Hastings, Corio).

3. Focus group discussions with targeted groups – Two to four focus groups were held with each selected target group to explore perceptions of, attitudes to and use of public libraries. Participants were recruited to the groups through networks of the community stakeholders (e.g. playgroups, youth groups, ethnic community associations). Participants included some people from the target groups who used public library services and some who did not (including some who were unaware of available library services). The number of participants in each group ranged from four to twenty, with in most cases eight to twelve people involved and a total of around thirty people from each target group. Focus group participants received refreshments and were reimbursed for their contribution.

The second stage of the research also involved three focus group discussions with interested staff from Victoria's public libraries. About fifty staff members took part in three separate focus groups, each in a different location and each concentrating on one or two of the selected target population groups. The aim of these focus groups was to canvass issues related to the use of libraries by the target groups, and also to identify the innovative strategies currently being adopted by Victorian public libraries to attract and engage these target groups. The three focus groups were:

• Indigenous Australians and Horn of Africa communities – East Melbourne Library.

• Disadvantaged young people and low-income families – Dandenong Library.

• Vulnerable learners – Broadmeadows Library.

The final stage of the Connecting with the Community research project was the writing of this report. The report has been structured to document the findings of the overall project and highlight the findings related to individual target groups. The introductory section of the report contains the research objectives, information on research methods, presentation of a set of Principles of User Engagement and a summary of the overall findings.

The body of the report is presented in five parts, each dedicated to one of the selected target groups. These self-contained research reports have:

1 A description of the selected target group.

2 A description of the group's primary library and information needs.

3 Ideas and lessons for engaging the target group from libraries in Victoria, Australia and overseas, based on the literature review, the staff focus groups and information provided by the LBC Workgroup.

4 Discussion of factors that can inhibit access to and use of library services by the target group.

5 Discussion of actions that Victorian public libraries might take to increase productive library use among the target group and build connections with the community.

6 References and further reading relevant to the research.

Information about strategies to engage other population groups could, if desired, also be presented as self-contained reports in this format, reflecting as these do the Principles of User Engagement described in the next section of this report.

Additional information about the individual research approaches adopted with each target group is contained in the report on each group.

Principles of user engagement

In undertaking the Libraries Building Communities Connecting with the Community research project, a number of common principles emerged that could underlie the effective engagement of hard-to-reach library users.

These principles apply to the engagement of all library users, including the general population and, within this, the selected target groups. They describe a desired outcome, not the method or process by which the outcome can be achieved (e.g. increasing engagement

Principle	
Awareness	Ensure all targeted user groups are aware of available library services.
Engagement	Create places and spaces that are accessible, inviting, engaging and comfortable for each targeted user group.
Collections, programs and services	Provide collections, programs and services that meet the library and information needs of each targeted user group.
Policies and procedures	Implement policies and procedures that maximise access to library services and allow all library users to have an enjoyable library experience.
Customer service	Ensure library staff have the motivation, capacity and resources to engage and support library users.

through provision of opportunities for users to contribute to library planning, activities and programs), as this may vary from library to library, or between user groups. The principles are provided for guidance, and are not intended as a complete recipe for widespread and effective community engagement with public libraries.

The application of these principles to each of the research target groups is discussed in the individual research reports. The principles are broadly used as the basis for discussing the library and information needs of the target groups, the factors that inhibit or constrain their use of library services, and the strategies libraries might adopt to increase community engagement.

Summary

The Libraries Building Communities initiative aims to convey to decision makers, and others, the breadth, depth and potential impact on the whole community of the modern public library. Libraries are immensely important to their communities – culturally, economically and socially:

Libraries collect and disseminate information; they provide comfortable and convenient places for people to read and learn; their physical spaces form meeting places for community groups; being free and open for all they help to create a fairer society ... [Public libraries are] highly valued by the communities they serve, and are uniquely placed to draw a diverse range of people and groups together (State Library of Victoria 2005a, p. 5).

The Connecting with the Community project has undertaken research to enable library managers and staff to better understand some marginalised and disadvantaged population groups that tend not to be library users. It is estimated that about 13% of Victorians have potentially much to gain from using libraries but face barriers in accessing and using these services. People in this group could benefit from the educational, recreational and social information resources and programs provided by Victoria's public libraries, but are unaware of or disengaged from library services. These are people from marginalised social groups whose access to information and technology is severely limited, and people who face special difficulties in using the library. These are people that libraries find hard to reach through their normal communication and networking activities.

This research is focused on collection of information that will provide a clearer picture of these hard-to-reach groups – their characteristics and barriers to participation. The report aims to suggest practical strategies and recommendations for meeting the specific needs of these groups. It also aims to enable Victoria's public library network to enhance the capacity and connectedness of Victorian communities.

Taking into account issues of relevance, benefits, policy connectedness, coverage and research efficiency, the LBC Workgroup selected five population groups to be the target of this research:

- Indigenous Australians
- Disadvantaged young people
- Horn of Africa communities
- Low-income families
- Vulnerable learners

These groups were selected on the basis that they represented populations who were thought to significantly underuse available library services. The more that public libraries know about the nature of these groups – their information needs, the factors that influence their access of information, the examples of library programs implemented in Victoria, Australia and overseas – the greater the opportunity for existing library services to be enhanced to better meet the needs of all members of the community.

The research does not suggest that all members of these population groups face barriers in accessing and using public library services. Nor does the research suggest that these groups fully cover the 13% of Victorians who may be marginalised in their access to information. Other groups might have been chosen. The research does not provide a cure-all to the challenges faced by these groups in accessing library services, nor a complete outreach strategy for every library. The research does not anticipate that every library will implement all of the programs and initiatives referenced in this report. Like any public institution, libraries cannot be all things to all people. The research emphasises the need to distinguish the important community role of library staff from that

of a welfare or social worker. It highlights the importance of libraries working closely with community health centres, child and migrant welfare agencies and other organisations that are able to complement the work of libraries by providing this type of support.

However, it is intended that the information contained in each of the individual sections of this report will be considered by library services as they assess the profile, characteristics and service needs of their local community. It is hoped that the challenges faced by these groups are better understood, and that methods of connecting with communities can be enhanced.

- Indigenous Australians are often unaware of what libraries have to offer, and feel uncomfortable in an unfamiliar environment. But if their library were a meeting place, a centre for bringing together information about Indigenous language and culture, then young and old they would come, they would share and they would learn.

- Disadvantaged young people want access to information, access to technology, and they want it now. There is information they need for educational and employment purposes; there is information they need to access community services. Libraries could be the place they come to for that information, if libraries had spaces and environments that were inviting, comfortable and entertaining.

- Horn of Africa communities in Victoria have been displaced, and are seeking connections: connections with one another; connections with their homeland, culture and traditions; and connections with their new home. They need to know what libraries have to offer. They need to develop English language and literacy skills. They need access to computers and information technology skills. They need access to information on jobs and community services. Libraries can work with these communities and their community leaders to fulfil these needs.

- Low-income families could benefit from many existing library services if they knew what was available: storytime for children, free access to the Internet, free access to books and magazines, support for skills development, and information on community

and employment services. These families need to be encouraged to come to and experience a modern public library. They need to feel welcomed and comfortable and able to take a little time out to read and take advantage of their library.

- Vulnerable learners are on the fringe of the workforce. They need access to information on education and employment opportunities. They need to develop information, literacy and information technology skills that are becoming essential in the workplace. They need to be encouraged to be lifelong learners. Many have not been in a public library for years, and once they find out about the resources, services and programs that libraries have to offer they can start to integrate their library into their learning plans.

The Connecting with the Community research aims to be a source of information and ideas that assist libraries to improve the quality and reach of service provision to give those who stand to benefit most the chance to access and use their local library. It is intended that this information promote discussion and community engagement.

It is hoped that in time the proportion of Victorians who have much to gain from using library services but face barriers in accessing and using these services might no longer be 13%, but 10% or 5% or even lower.

References

State Library of Victoria 2005a, *Libraries Building Communities: Executive Summary*, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.

State Library of Victoria 2005b, *Libraries Building Communities Report Three: Bridging the Gaps*, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.

Vinson, T 2007, *Dropping off the Edge: The Distribution of Disadvantage in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia, Melbourne.

Part E: Vulnerable learners

The approach should be inclusive. There is great diversity within the older adult population, and [library] programs and services should be planned with attention to all segments.

VAN FLEET N.D.

E1   Vulnerable learners

Background

Lifelong learning enables all members of society to be informed, entertained and engaged with their community. Lifelong learning is a key element in reducing disadvantage and strengthening individual and community wellbeing. In particular, the pace of workplace reform and the impact of technology have made it essential for the entire community to embrace a lifelong approach to learning.

The twenty-first century workforce requires skills and competencies that were unknown when many current workers first got a job. Over the past 30 years, there has been a dramatic shift away from manufacturing, process, agricultural and other labour-intensive occupations to more service-oriented and technology-based jobs. This has meant that many people with relatively low levels of literacy, low levels of written and verbal communication skills, and without computer skills are finding it increasingly difficult to retain a position in or re-enter the workforce. The ever-increasing demand for qualifications and work-ready skills also affects women returning to the workforce after raising children, and young adults who left school early and are now seeking educational qualifications.

This group of people may be termed 'vulnerable learners'. Vulnerable learners are not strictly defined by demographic, ethnic, socioeconomic, geographic or other characteristics. They are a group who may have lacked the opportunities to participate in learning, faced structural barriers to learning, not been motivated to learn or lacked experience in learning, yet for whom learning has become critical to their social and economic wellbeing.

The most identifiable group of vulnerable learners and the group on which much of the findings of this report are based are in the latter part of their working life, probably aged 45 to 65 years. They may be long-term or recently unemployed, or may be working in an industry undergoing structural change and labour force reduction. They are unlikely to have had any formal educational

experience since secondary school. They are likely to have low levels of literacy and numeracy, and may be from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background. They are unlikely to be regular computer users.

Through a combination of factors, people in this group find themselves at risk of being marginalised from the workforce, and excluded from all the advantages that workforce participation bestows.

The challenges for vulnerable learners

The focus for vulnerable learners is primarily on development of work-related skills, but also on learning for life. Many people are keen to learn new skills for work and recreation, and just need support from community groups, including libraries, to make this happen. For others, lifelong learning may not be a perspective that they understand or personally feel comfortable with.

Recent research conducted by Melbourne's Darebin City Council found that the more marginalised adults tended to view learning as a luxury, and something 'not for them' (Basset 2006). The links between class, status and education were very strong in the minds of these participants. They may have had low-level educational attainment as children or adolescents and self-selected out of opportunities and invitations to participate in formal learning, at least in part because of their view of learning. Some saw learning as unnecessary or not legitimate because of their age. And for some, memories of their time in the compulsory education system continue to impact on their motivation to learn (Basset 2006).

At the same time, there are negative attitudes in the community towards older people participating in learning that provides what is seen by many as basic job-readiness skills. These attitudes can impact heavily on participants' self-confidence and self-actualisation, and reduce their confidence that they can learn, grow and contribute to society.

Yet it is also true to say that many people who find themselves in this group, and at risk of longer-term marginalisation and disconnection from work-related aspects of society, are often currently connected into the community through their participation in cultural groups, clubs and friendship and family circles. These connections are valuable, but can be tested as personal circumstances change, an outcome to which many long-term unemployed persons can attest.

A submission to a United Kingdom Parliamentary Education and Skills Committee 2006–07 Inquiry into Skills stresses the importance of learning to vulnerable adults for their entire wellbeing:

> *The most vulnerable adults in society remain the least likely to take part in learning, despite the Government's Skills Strategy and having the most to gain by improving their skills … Low participation in learning by vulnerable workless adults occurs in spite of their strong appetite for improved skills and employment. For vulnerable adults, skills are as relevant to secure housing, improved health and social inclusion as they are to sustainable employment (Education and Skills Select Committee 2007).*

E2   Library and information needs

A comprehensive review of literature on library services and discussions with community members through the Connecting with the Community research project have identified the main library and information needs of vulnerable learners.

Library and information needs: Vulnerable learners
Literacy, information and IT skills essential to workforce participation.
Access to learning and information resources.
Information about educational and employment opportunities.
A supportive learning experience that encourages lifelong learning.

Literacy, information and information technology skills essential to workforce participation

Vulnerable learners may be at risk of becoming disengaged from the workforce due to their low levels of literacy, information and information technology skills. Possessing these skills does not mean they will retain their current employment, but it does increase their likelihood of remaining in the labour force should they become unemployed or be made redundant. Other learners seek to develop skills to enable them to make a transition into employment or into more secure employment. Although libraries may not be the ultimate source of skills acquisition for vulnerable learners, they offer services that are valuable to people without a background in formal education or learning.

Vulnerable learners generally need to develop their literacy skills, particularly if they are from a CALD background and English is not their first language. More than any other skill-set, the capacity to read and write, and to be able to communicate effectively in written and oral form, is essential for job retention and job acquisition. Libraries are a central community training ground that offers access to materials and resources for development and practising of literacy skills.

Information and computer skills are also important for vulnerable learners, as most jobs now involve some form of access to computers or technology. Recent research conducted in the Australian vocational education and training sector has found that more than two-thirds of employers believe that all people in the workplace need good computer skills, regardless of whether those skills are used to a great or any extent in the workplace (Australian Flexible Learning Framework 2007). Libraries provide free access to computers, and potentially opportunities for basic training in computer skills that are valuable for vulnerable learners who might not have home computer or Internet access.

Access to learning and information resources

Learners, in most situations, need access to learning and information resources. These might include textbooks, other physical reference material, CDs and DVDs, and online information. Libraries have the capacity to provide vulnerable learners, who might be from lower socioeconomic groups, with low-cost access to learning resources they might not be able to easily obtain elsewhere.

Information about educational and employment opportunities

Vulnerable learners need access to relevant, often community-based, learning opportunities to enhance their literacy, information and computer skills. They may also need to access formal educational programs provided by public and private registered training organisations or educational institutions. Vulnerable learners are likely to be unfamiliar with these learning opportunities, what they involve and how to access them.

Vulnerable learners might also need to be able to access information on employment opportunities in their area. Again, they may have worked with one employer for many years or be looking to re-enter the workforce and will not be familiar with how to seek out employment information using modern channels (e.g. **www.seek.com.au**).

A supportive learning experience that encourages lifelong learning

While it is valuable for all people in a community to develop a love of learning and a healthy approach to lifelong learning, this is more difficult for those who do not have a history of learning. Vulnerable learners need to be supported in their endeavours by taking their first steps to re-engaging with learning, whether this be formal or informal, in a personally supportive environment.

E3   Ideas and lessons

Victorian public libraries and their counterparts interstate and overseas have implemented a range of programs to support the library and information needs of vulnerable learners:

- computer and Internet classes (general or targeted to particular community groups, e.g. Chinese computer classes, computer classes for women, introductory PC classes for over 50s);

- computer skills guides;

- study groups for adult learners;

- book clubs;

- resource centres for job seekers.

These types of activities have general application to other community groups, not just adult learners looking to re-engage with the workforce, but they are particularly important to this group. Other examples of library programs and initiatives adopted elsewhere in Australia and overseas are provided here, with additional references in section E6.

Literacy and Learning Assessment, City of Greater Dandenong Libraries, Victoria

The City of Greater Dandenong Libraries has a formalised relationship with Centrelink[6] and the Adult Multicultural Education Services to conduct literacy assessments for Centrelink clients and support them in accessing language, literacy and computer skills and collections in languages other than English. This service is promoted through Centrelink, the Victorian Department of Human Services and local CALD community groups, and enables vulnerable learners to be introduced to libraries as a by-product of their assessment.

The libraries support access and equity for the pursuit of lifelong learning through the English Language and

Literacy Access program, a free community service provided by the City of Greater Dandenong. The program helps non-English- and English-speaking adults to learn English, improve their reading and writing, gain information about further study, and explore lifelong learning opportunities.

The libraries' website also has a direct link from the home page to a job opportunity page run by the council advertising vacancies in the City of Greater Dandenong. There are also links to information for users looking for a job, wanting to update their résumé, or needing hints on interviews and understanding the interview process through the libraries' Job and Course Link.

Wynlearn, Wyndham City Library Service, Victoria

Wynlearn is a website designed to increase awareness of and participation in lifelong learning opportunities among Wyndham residents. The Wyndham Community Learning Strategy 2005–2008 found that compared with the rest of Melbourne, Wyndham residents leave school earlier and have fewer tertiary qualifications. There are also low participation rates in adult and community education locally. Through a Libraries Building Communities' Demonstration Grant from the Library Board of Victoria, the Wyndham City Library Service established a dedicated online portal which brings together information about learning events and learning organisations in the local area.

Wynlearn (**www.wynlearn.net.au**) allows users to browse through categories of learning opportunities, providing details of each course as well as venue information. The site has innovative features such as allowing users to create learner profiles to notify them of new learning events in their areas of interest. Wynlearn enables users to:

- browse or search a calendar of learning opportunities within Wyndham. Searches can be narrowed by area of interest, favourite provider and/or time of day. Users can then register to book into a learning opportunity;

6Centrelink is the Australian Government agency that offers a range of employment, welfare, social and support services and payment options to more than one-third of the Australian population.

- find details for local learning providers by clicking on a map of their local area;

- discuss learning opportunities within Wyndham with other users, and post their own topics in an online discussion forum;

- access articles and news feeds about adult and community education in Australia and links to other organisations.

Skills.net Roadshow, State Library of Victoria/ Department of Planning and Community Development, Victoria

The Skills.net Roadshow, funded by the Victorian Government and managed by the Vicnet division of the State Library of Victoria, delivers free introductory Internet training to those who do not possess the skills or normally would not have access to the Internet. Skills.net Roadshow trainers travel across Victoria delivering one or more of the introductory sessions, providing laptop computers or deliver the training at local training venues.

The sessions are targeted at Victorians who are Internet beginners. No minimum computer skills are required. The program also targets participants who fall into one or more of the following categories: people who are unemployed; people with a disability; people over 55 years of age; people from non-English-speaking backgrounds; recent migrants; Indigenous people; or people who did not gain Internet skills at school or work.

For more information see: **www.roadshow.skills.net.au**

Words in the Workplace, Manchester Library and Information Service, United Kingdom

The Learning Centre at Hammerstone Road Depot, Manchester, is a joint employer/trade union initiative designed to allow employees to attend basic skills classes in work time. The program has been running for about five years with classes delivered by adult education tutors. The Manchester Library and Information Service supports the work and promotes reading for pleasure through programs such as Quick Reads and Raw Passions. Rosemary Ryan, the Fiction

and Reader Development Co-ordinator for the Library and Information Service explains how learners developed their creative writing skills:

> *In January 2007, using the theme of 'Bringing Life to Words', as part of the RaW Cities Festival in Manchester and Salford, we commissioned Craig Bradley, poet and creative writing facilitator, to run four sessions designed to engage participants with words, reading and writing for pleasure. The sessions covered one topic each time: life stories, sports writing and poetry. The outcome was several pieces of writing by individuals, and a group poem. For the fourth session we had planned to do fiction, but instead we used it to prepare a live broadcast on BBC Radio Manchester, with Craig reading the group poem and one of the learners reading his story on air (Ryan 2007, p. 1).*

Most of these men had never produced a piece of creative writing in their adult lives. However, by building up relationships over the sessions, using contemporary song lyrics as an example of poetry, and using extracts from biographies of people they knew, by the second session some were so enthusiastic they went home and wrote pieces, which they brought back the following week.

The sessions were a fantastic example of a successful partnership, working between the BBC, which supported the sessions with funding, and the Manchester City Council's Adult Education, Libraries and Operational Services departments.

Learning Center, Brooklyn Public Library, New York, United States of America

Learn to Read @ The Library is an innovative educational program at the Brooklyn Public Library for beginning adult readers and writers, offering resources and instruction through volunteer tutors and technology-assisted learning. The learning and employment services provided by the centre include:

- volunteer tutors help adults learn to read, write and use computer technology;

- a free education and job information service for job hunters, career changers, and students of all ages;

- free English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) services, materials, classes and conversation groups;

- Pre-General Equivalency Diploma services;

- Skills Training and Employment Project in which job seekers get access to career advisers, guidance, training and resources.

For more information see: **www.brooklynpubliclibrary. org**

The Adult Learner Program, Queens Library, United States of America

Queens Library in New York started its Adult Learner Program in 1977 to provide services, resources, and lifelong learning opportunities to the changing communities of the borough of Queens. The program has six adult learning centres which provide educational services to ESOL and literacy adult learners.

Literacy learners are speakers of English who need to develop their reading and writing skills to improve their employment and life opportunities. Literacy students learn to read in small groups led by staff or volunteer tutors. Students also study on their own under the supervision of staff or in student-led groups. Students work on the reading and writing skills needed for banking, shopping, filling out application forms, writing to their child's teacher and other daily tasks. Special events and field trips are organised by staff and tutors to give students the opportunity to work together on projects and activities of relevance to their needs.

Each adult learning centre is equipped with computers and educational software for language skills learning. Students may also participate in computer-based projects that allow them to become more familiar with the computer while learning English and practising their reading and writing. Each centre has a collection of books, and audio and video tapes available for students of all levels. Some centres also offer basic education classes for adults who aspire to develop their academic

skills to a Pre-General Equivalency Diploma level. These classes focus on the development of useful learning strategies to enable students to move from group tutoring to classroom learning, and to ready them to continue their education. The Adult Learner Program relies strongly on the input from its trained volunteer workforce.

For more information see: **www.queenslibrary.org**

Center for Adult Learning, Jacksonville Public Library, Florida, United States of America

Jacksonville Public Library's Center for Adult Learning receives funding from businesses, organisations and charitable foundations to help deliver a program aimed at improving the functional literacy of adult learner, that is, the ability to read and write at a level that makes it possible to function in today's world: write a cheque; follow a recipe; use a computer; read a newspaper; fill out a job application; find a number in a phone book; read warning labels on medication; or read a letter from your child's teacher. Volunteers serve as tutors, work in the office, and speak to community groups.

All participants undergo an assessment and together the student and tutor make an individual education plan. With help from instructors, audio and video tapes and personal computers, students receive instruction in four areas: reading; basic maths skills for everyday living; life skills and ESOL reading and conversational skills.

For more information see: **jpl.coj.net/lib/adult_ learning.html**

The Vital Link, United Kingdom Public Libraries and the National Literacy Trust, United Kingdom

The Vital Link in the United Kingdom is run by the Reading Agency in partnership with the National Literacy Trust, the National Reading Campaign and public libraries. The program supports vulnerable learners and lifelong learning by aiming to enable adults with low literacy levels to benefit from a consistently high-quality reading service and realise the pleasure of reading as well as the personal benefits this can bring.

The program commenced in 2001 and has developed many learning resources, toolkits, guidance and case studies to support public libraries in the delivery of program activities. For example, the toolkit provides support on 'reader development', a proactive approach to promoting reading which focuses on the needs of the individual reader and offers support and choice. The Vital Link improvement framework provides advice for librarians and reading tutors on: where to start; setting up a reading group; running a session; linking to the adult literacy core curriculum; using information technology for reader development; special events and activities; and evaluating reader development work.

For more information see: **www.literacytrust.org.uk/ vitallink/about.html**

E4 Accessing and using library services

The Connecting with the Community research conducted focus groups with vulnerable learners and community organisations with an interest in supporting their access to public library services. These identified a number of significant factors that influence the library use of vulnerable learners. These are summarised below.

Factors influencing library use: Vulnerable learners	
Awareness	Very low level of awareness of library services.
Engagement	Low levels of literacy and numeracy.
	Discomfort in coming to an unfamiliar centre for reading and learning.
Policies and procedures	Limited opening hours for working people.
Customer service	Library staff experienced or perceived as unapproachable and unhelpful.

Very low level of awareness of library services

Vulnerable learners are likely to have very little or no awareness of the reading, literacy, computer and adult learning services provided by or accessible through public libraries. They are a group that has been out of formal education for some time and may be less likely to do recreational reading. They may not have visited a library since their school days, and even then their low level of educational attainment suggests they may not have been passionate library users. They may be migrants or people from a non-English-speaking background with no home culture of library use. They may have family or friends who use library services but will know very little about this use and have little interest in libraries.

Vulnerable learners' idea of library resources may not be much more than books, with little awareness of access to CDs, DVDs, magazines and newspapers. Their expectations of libraries are of 'a quiet place', and not a place where activities occur, nor a place where technology can be found. Vulnerable learners tend not to connect libraries and learning.

Low levels of literacy and numeracy

One of the defining characteristics of vulnerable learners is their low levels of literacy and numeracy. They are also likely to have limited computer skills, even though their children may be literate and competent computer users. The reasons for this functional illiteracy and potentially their low level of educational attainment as children or adolescents may vary (e.g. migration, family circumstances and employment priorities, learning difficulties, poverty), and is relevant in developing engagement strategies. However, the consequence is the same for all vulnerable learners: discomfort in an environment founded on literacy.

Discomfort in coming to an unfamiliar centre for reading and learning

With little or no recent experience of libraries, and with low literacy levels, vulnerable learners may feel uncomfortable in a library setting, and even threatened and intimidated. This is not about the safety of the library, which is universally seen as a safe place, but the risk of exposure of their low literacy levels, something they may have worked to cover up and cope with over many years.

The feedback from vulnerable learners consulted during the Connecting with the Community research highlighted some of the drivers and characteristics of this discomfort. One of these was the architectural design of libraries, with traditional older libraries and imposing and eye-catching modern libraries both creating a sense of being overwhelmed and unwelcome, especially to someone lacking confidence in crossing the threshold. Inside, the vibrant library design that is engaging and interesting for younger and active library users can be inhibiting to the reluctant library user. The wall of books to someone with low functional literacy is confronting and challenging.

Vulnerable learners are likely to be coming to a library because they have acknowledged a deficiency in their educational skill base, and potentially their social skills. Anything that draws attention to this deficit will make them uncomfortable. Anyone with clearly superior literacy, reading and information levels, such as a librarian, will increase this discomfort.

Limited opening hours for working people

As distinct from vulnerable learners who are unemployed, those who are working are likely to be working in occupations where they have little flexibility in working hours. They may also have family commitments that impose on their time. If libraries are not open at convenient times, or run programs when it is difficult for working adults to participate, this can be a reason not to attend a library, even if they could benefit from being there.

Library staff experienced or perceived as unapproachable and unhelpful

It was interesting to note that the research uncovered a number of vulnerable learners who were non-library users who talked about a past and unpleasant experience with a librarian as a reason for not going to a library. The incidents were often many years ago, and in retrospect probably inconsequential, but the perception of library staff as being 'unapproachable' and 'unhelpful' remains.

As vulnerable learners come to the idea of using a library despite a level of discomfort, and might avoid it if this decision could be rationalised, the potential for library staff to be unfriendly and unwelcoming is a factor in the learners' library use. This presents a challenge for all library staff, who need to be friendly, approachable and knowledgeable, but not so knowledgeable as to be seen as overbearing.

E5   Connecting with the community

A range of potential responses from Victorian public libraries to the findings of the Connecting with the Community research project with regard to vulnerable learners is presented below. However, the primary feedback from this research is that if adult learners were aware of what was available at their public library and made to feel comfortable in coming to the library they would be far more active and regular users of library services. That is, in the words of one library staff member:

> *The trick is to get them in the door. Once they're in, they'll come back.*

Opportunities for libraries to reach out to communities: Vulnerable learners	
Awareness	Promote awareness of library services through community networks.
Engagement	Assist people to engage with the library through community-based participation in library activities.
Library programs and collections	Conduct or facilitate access to literacy and IT classes for adult learners.
	Encourage volunteer support for adult learners.
Policies and procedures	Examine options for increasing library opening hours and access points.
Customer service	Review staffing, task allocations and professional development to enable library staff to be more accessible to assist learners with inquiries.

Promote awareness of library services through community networks

Vulnerable learners need access to literacy, information and computer skills, and public libraries provide a community setting for accessing training opportunities or information about training. However, vulnerable learners are not aware of the role of libraries in supporting literacy and learning.

Libraries need to raise awareness of the services they provide to vulnerable learners. They cannot assume that adult learners who may be otherwise well networked in their community know what their library has to offer. The most effective channel for this communication would appear to be through established community networks and organisations that vulnerable learners are already involved with. For people from a CALD background this may be through local ethnic groups and ethnic media. The Australian Government's central employment agency, Centrelink, provides a pivotal point of access and information for the unemployed, as do local employment networks. Information could be disseminated through sporting clubs, schools, medical centres and other community facilities.

Given that vulnerable learners have relatively low levels of literacy, personal engagement is likely to be more effective than print-based communication. Radio and electronic media also avoid some of the literacy issues. Where printed information on library services is distributed, it should use visual images and basic language so that it is accessible by all.

Assist people to engage with the library through community-based participation in library activities

In addition to raising awareness through community networks, these networks might also be used to facilitate engagement of vulnerable learners with library services. The aim is to connect libraries to people by being in places that people go to, and being places where people feel comfortable.

Libraries could connect with community-based learning organisations and non-learning organisations to support targeting of vulnerable learners and delivery of adult training. This might include:

- CALD groups and peak bodies;
- multicultural resource centres and language centres;
- Centrelink;
- job network agencies;
- Adult Multicultural Education Services;
- community-based registered training organisations and TAFE colleges;
- University of the Third Age;
- church and religious groups;
- schools;
- local council community officers.

It is recommended that where possible, vulnerable learners be 'introduced' to their library as part of a group or with a familiar person. This will eliminate some of the discomfort in an individual and personalised 'first' experience at the library. Community groups could host a tour of the library, with library users from within the group talking about their experience of the library and how it assists them. This approach has the benefits of building links with key community groups and making vulnerable learners feel more comfortable in the library, and creating a support network for the vulnerable learner.

Libraries could run open days, or activities for children while adults get to stay and learn about their library. Libraries could also have regular induction days or introductory tours at appropriate times, targeted at people with little experience of libraries and low levels of literacy, information and computer skills, and highlighting these services to participants.

Conduct or facilitate access to literacy and information technology classes for adult learners

Most Victorian public libraries already offer some form of computer training or support, which is valuable to vulnerable learners. Literacy and reading support programs also exist, although these may not have a component targeted at adult learners. The City of Greater Dandenong's English Language and Literacy Access program is an example of where this approach has been implemented.

However, libraries may not always be the point of delivery for literacy and computer classes for vulnerable learners. In this case, the library can be the window to the adult learning training opportunities that exist within the local community, as the Wynlearn portal has done in the City of Wyndham. The more comprehensive the resources available and the more visible the links to training and employment websites (e.g. **www.seek.com.au**, **www. seeklearning.com.au**), the more chance that vulnerable learners will feel supported in their training search and endeavours.

Encourage volunteer support for adult learners

The international experience in literacy and learning programs in libraries is that volunteers play a crucial role in providing the human resources to deliver and support these programs. Realistically, Victorian public libraries are not in a position to provide significant staffing support to literacy and learning programs, unless this occurs in conjunction with formal literacy and education providers.

Libraries should look to develop a volunteer base with the skills to work with adult learners in initial skill development areas, possibly as a precursor to more formal training. Libraries could also seek to re-engage participants in these programs on other volunteer

activities within the library, thereby expanding their exposure to the library, reading and information services that are useful to them. This might in some cases provide voluntary experience that would support vulnerable learners in establishing new career pathways.

Examine options for increasing library opening hours and access points

Libraries should not base opening hours or the location of access points on the interests of a single user group, or potential user group. However, if vulnerable learners are to be targeted it must be acknowledged that working adults with standard and inflexible working hours may have limited capacity to access library services other than in evenings or on weekends.

Libraries could also build partnerships with community service outlets that 'decentralise' access to library services (e.g. have access points in shopping centres, community centres and take an active interest in civic redevelopment).

Enable library staff to be more accessible to assist learners with inquiries

Enabling library staff to be more accessible to assist vulnerable learners is more than just a resourcing and scheduling issue. Library staff need the skills to present themselves as friendly and approachable. They need to be informed and helpful and able to build confidence in new adult library users. They need to patiently take time to provide the support needed and be able to step back when this is no longer required.

The professional development of library staff has been a key to literacy and learning programs in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, and is no less relevant in Australia. In particular, staff have the capacity to use reference inquiries as a way of engaging library users in accessing other information services.

E6 References and further reading

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Further reading

The following reports and websites provide information on vulnerable learners and the role of libraries in assisting them to access relevant community information and resources:

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