

LIBRARIES/BUILDING/COMMUNITIES

THE VITAL CONTRIBUTION OF VICTORIA'S PUBLIC LIBRARIES – A RESEARCH REPORT
FOR THE LIBRARY BOARD OF VICTORIA AND THE VICTORIAN PUBLIC LIBRARY NETWORK

Connecting with the Community **Part A: Indigenous Australians**

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



Library Board
of Victoria



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

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Published May 2008 by
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ISBN 978 0 646 48644 4

Contents

| | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| | Introduction | 5 |
| | Research methods | 6 |
| | Principles of user engagement | 8 |
| | Summary | 9 |
| | References | 11 |
| | Part A: Indigenous Australians | 12 |
| A1 | Indigenous Australians | 12 |
| A2 | Library and information needs | 14 |
| A3 | Ideas and lessons | 16 |
| A4 | Accessing and using library services | 22 |
| A5 | Connecting with the community | 25 |
| A6 | References and further reading | 27 |

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.

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

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Part A: Indigenous Australians

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders need to be involved in the decision-making processes, at all levels, to achieve informed and appropriate directions and agendas across the library and information sector.

NSLA 2006, P. 2

A1 Indigenous Australians

Background

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 2006 Census indicates that there were 30,141 Indigenous people living in Victoria, representing 0.6% of the population. This compares with a count of 25,059 Indigenous people in the 2001 Census. The Indigenous population in Victoria is smaller than that in other parts of Australia with 455,018 Indigenous people counted Australia-wide in 2006 (2.3% of the population), up from 410,003 in 2001 (ABS 2008).¹ Profile data from the 2001 Census details the characteristics of Victoria's Indigenous population:

- Victoria's Indigenous population has a considerably younger age structure than the non-Indigenous population, with 57% under the age of 25 years, compared with 34% of the total Victorian population.
- Over half (52%) of Victoria's Indigenous people live outside the Melbourne metropolitan area. This compares with 28% of the non-Indigenous population, and strongly reflects Indigenous people's connection with traditional lands.
- The Goulburn Statistical Division, with 11% of Victoria's Indigenous population, has the largest number of Indigenous residents outside Melbourne, with 59% of these people living within the City of Greater Shepparton. The Mallee Statistical Division has 8% of Victoria's Indigenous population, with 51% of these people living in Mildura Rural City.
- Forty-eight per cent of Victoria's Indigenous population is in the Statistical Division of Melbourne; 13% of these reside within Northern Middle Melbourne, a further 11% in Western Melbourne and another 9% in South Eastern Outer Melbourne.

¹Census data is generally regarded as underestimating the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous/statistics.cfm) notes the uncertainties regarding Indigenous population estimates in the Census. They observe that between the 1996 and 2001 Censuses, estimates of the Indigenous population increased by 19% and that a change of this magnitude can only be partially explained in terms of natural increases determined by births, deaths and migration levels. They conclude that much of the additional change 'appears to be the result of increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identifying as Indigenous on census forms' (AIHW 2006). It is likely that this effect also influenced the 'increase' in Indigenous population counts from 2001 to 2006.

The *Victorian Indigenous Homelessness Study*, published by the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria (Berry et al. 2001), reports that the Aboriginal community of Victoria is not a homogenous group connected to one area or having exactly the same needs and cultural practices. There are about 2,500 to 3,000 families belonging to some 35 major Indigenous clans. Although all Indigenous groups share particular issues and problems, an underlying historical diversity of cultures, languages and traditional practices explains the complex make-up of the Indigenous community in Victoria.

Disadvantage for Indigenous Australians

In the presentation notes to her paper *Indigenous Knowledge Centre Developments and the Indigenous Library Services Strategy*, Sandi Taylor, from the State Library of Queensland, describes the level of disadvantage in Aboriginal communities:

Indigenous Australians continue to have the lowest socio-economic profile of all Australians, the worst health of any group in Australia and significantly lower levels of participation and attainment in formal education. Babies of Indigenous mothers are twice as likely to die at birth or during the early post-natal phase than babies born to other Australian mothers (Taylor 2005, p. 1).

Taylor emphasises that when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is important to recognise the level of disadvantage and the policies that have created this situation.

In her response to the 1995 National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, Lowitja O'Donoghue connected practices of the past, which saw Aboriginal children taken away from their families and communities, to current levels of disadvantage:

The effects of [practices such as these] have resulted in intergenerational trauma for indigenous Australians, as well as disadvantage, lack of access and equity and lack of social justice (SA Link-Up Program n.d.).

The *Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework* quotes data showing that Indigenous people die on average 20 years younger than other Victorian citizens, and experience a greater concentration of hardship and trauma over the course of their lives (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria 2006). Writing about the Aboriginal community in Shepparton, Neville Atkinson (2006) notes:

- Five years into the twenty-first century, the Aboriginal community in Shepparton experiences unemployment estimated to be as high as 77%, versus 6% for the local mainstream community.
- School retention rates for young Indigenous people are as low as 26%, while for the remainder of the Goulburn Valley community it is more than 70%.
- Aboriginal share of the documented wealth of the community is less than two-tenths of 1% of the total, even though the community makes up about 10% of the community population.

In another article in *The Age*, Paul Briggs provides special insight into the issues facing Aboriginal people in Victoria. He notes that the idea that Australia's 'genuine' Indigenous people can only be found in remote northern and north-western Australia is part of a national tendency that consistently undermines the identity of almost 200,000 Aboriginal people (half of the nation's documented total Aboriginal population) who live in south-eastern Australia:

... south-eastern Australia's Aborigines have no opportunity to take identity for granted, and no opportunity to celebrate their culture in the environment of diversity and multiculturalism that the nation purportedly values (Briggs 2006, p. 1).

Further, Briggs notes:

... a penetrating sadness in the consequence that indigenous people in communities such as Victoria are constantly portrayed as groups that have not made a contribution to the economic and social fabric of the wider community ...

If indigenous people in south-eastern Australia are to join the mainstream as equals in our national society, then we need to be allowed to reclaim and share our identity and culture. That requires an acceptance that identity is not prescribed by geography and cannot be imposed on people by commercial forces or cultural dominance (Briggs 2006, p. 2).

The *Victorian Indigenous Homelessness Study* outlines some of the cultural values important to Indigenous Australians (Berry et al. 2001). Issues of family are fundamental to understanding Indigenous needs and cultural practices, and the family is a broader concept than for most other groups. Family obligations are also very important, as a study participant said:

It's about a 'sense of belonging' and being part of a community – when I go home to my community or when I go to my father's country, I know I'm going home (Berry et al. 2001, p. 4).

Material wealth is shared, as in many families, but within much more extended family networks. In addition, comfort using outdoor space may conflict with the rules and regulations of the mainstream community. For example, different Indigenous groups may make choices about indoors or outdoors cooking and sleeping according to a cultural norm, and not necessarily due to a lack of shelter.

A2 Library and information needs

A 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 Indigenous Australians. For anyone who is new to the field, or who has never had an opportunity to think about the issues in relation to the information and library needs of Indigenous people, a good place to start is the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services* (ATSILIRN 2005) (see section A3). These issues are placed in a broader policy context in the *Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework* (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria 2006), which identifies a number of strategic areas for action.

Library and information needs: Indigenous Australians

Access to information, resources and services to improve literacy and numeracy.

Access to information, resources and services that support Year 12 completion, educational attainment and development of pathways to employment.

Capacity to capture, maintain and access information about Indigenous people's language and cultural heritage.

Engagement in provision of library and information services to Indigenous people.

Access to information to improve literacy and numeracy

Literacy is a central issue for Indigenous communities, as overall levels of literacy among the Indigenous population remain well below those of other Australians. Lack of fundamental English literacy skills has profound effects on further educational participation and achievement. Although literacy levels are higher in urban areas, they still lag behind levels for non-Indigenous students.

Literacy is a fundamental principle of library service. In August 2004, the Northern Territory Minister for Local Government, Mr John Ah Kit, declared to Parliament:

One of the aims of libraries is to preserve our Indigenous culture and encourage community development ... Libraries and knowledge centres will offer programs to increase literacy awareness (Ah Kit 2004).

Indigenous Australians need a focal point for access to literacy support, as well as information, learning and recreational reading. This includes reading support for young children as they learn to read, as well as literacy programs for older Indigenous Australians:

'Aboriginal people with limited literacy who use our Library are predominantly looking for imagery that reflects their world in books and videos' (Senior 2006, p. 4).

Access to information to support educational attainment and employment pathways

Indigenous Australians' workforce participation, employment rates, levels of educational attainment and Year 12 completion are also well below those of other Australians. This is in part linked to low literacy levels, as well as limited access to education and employment. However, there is also a need for Indigenous Australians to be able to access information about educational and employment opportunities and pathways, and to develop job readiness and information technology skills.

Public libraries are a common community information access point that can support the provision of these services to Indigenous Australians.

Capacity to capture and pass on language and cultural heritage

Indigenous culture places great store in the tradition and passing on of Indigenous language and heritage:

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia are diverse in their cultures, histories and languages, and so their information requirements are equally diverse. Australia has over 200 distinct Aboriginal groups, plus the peoples of the Torres Strait; of these groups there are approximately 100 languages still spoken (ATSILIRN 2008).

Aboriginal people feel very strongly about language; the historical degradation of all Aboriginal languages is well documented and ongoing. So much has been taken from Aboriginal people since invasion that, like the land, language had become a precious and binding force which equates with identity (ICVET 2008).

The limited number of publications of Indigenous languages material is noted in the literature; there is enormous potential for capturing the songs, dance, art and stories of Aboriginal communities.

In her paper presented to librarians, historians and archivists at the Deadly Directions conference in August 2005, Jackie Huggins talks about why information or 'memory' services are important to the Aboriginal community. Two points are of particular importance:

Organisations like yours can surely assist to make sure that information is preserved for future generations and scholars who wish to pursue their interests in this field. Record keeping organization[s] can make such a huge difference in the lives of so many.

Genealogy is becoming increasingly important for all Indigenous peoples because of native title claims and the need to find out about family, home and country (Huggins 2005).

Therefore, one of the most culturally valuable services that public libraries can provide for Indigenous Australians and the broader community is to be a centre for capturing, maintaining and accessing information about Indigenous people's language and heritage. In doing this, emphasis would need to be placed on Aboriginal ownership, management and control of this material, and ensuring respect for Aboriginal languages and culture.

Engagement in service provision

If Indigenous Australians are to be encouraged to use library services, they need to feel welcome and engaged. Consultation with Indigenous people found that they felt more comfortable in libraries if there were people there that they were familiar with and felt comfortable to approach. They also said that they needed to feel that the library had something to offer them that is both interesting and valuable in terms of information and resources, as well as being culturally relevant. That is, they wanted to be involved, and be seen to be involved, in the development and provision of library services to Indigenous people.

A3 Ideas and lessons

Victorian public libraries and their counterparts interstate have implemented a range of programs to support the library and information needs of Indigenous Australians, as overseas libraries have done to support the library needs of their indigenous communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols for libraries, Australia

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services* was first published by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) in 1995. The protocols address issues and concerns related to Indigenous materials held in libraries, archives and other information services, as well as those related to the provision of services for Indigenous people. The protocols serve as a guide to assist libraries when handling Indigenous materials and interacting with Indigenous peoples.

The protocols were reviewed in 2004 to establish the extent of their use, how useful they are and barriers to use. This led to their revision with improvements in content and supporting information and presentation. The revised protocols are available from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network (ATSILIRN 2005) and provide extensive information and suggestions for those working in the library, archives and information areas. The key points from the protocols are summarised below.

| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols for libraries | |
|--|--|
| Content and perspective | <p>Accept the crucial need to consult in an appropriate and ongoing manner with relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the development and management of their collections.</p> <p>Make a serious effort to balance collections by acquiring material by, as well as that about, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.</p> <p>Support the growth in publishing of material by Indigenous peoples by sponsoring publications, promoting writing groups or offering to house records.</p> <p>Collect material about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from the local area.</p> <p>Facilitate the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community keeping places in which documentation of importance to a community, or copies of the documentation, can be kept in appropriate environmental conditions and under appropriate control.</p> |
| Intellectual property | <p>Recognise the primary rights of the owners of a culture ... 'it must be the indigenous people with authority in the particular group who own the information who advise on research and curatorial practices' (Langton quoted in ATSILIRN 2005, p. 4).</p> |
| Accessibility and use | <p>Endeavour to make Aboriginal people feel comfortable in libraries. This includes having approachable staff members, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander faces among the staff, an easy atmosphere and pleasant surroundings.</p> <p>Extend beyond the walls of the organisation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be employed as liaison officers. This will serve to promote libraries and encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to use the facilities as a meeting place and resource.</p> |
| Description and classification of materials | <p>Move away from the use of outdated, inaccurate or value-laden terms to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in indexing terminology, subject headings and classification systems.</p> |
| Secret or sacred materials | <p>Show sensitivity to both published and archival materials that contain secret or sacred information and which should not be made generally available.</p> |
| Offensive material | <p>Recognise that collections may contain materials that are offensive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Accept responsibility to preserve and make accessible the documentary record but also respond appropriately to the existence of offensive materials.</p> |
| Governance and management | <p>Ensure the involvement and participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in governance, management and operation of materials with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.</p> |
| Staffing | <p>Take affirmative action to recruit and promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This responsibility will require employers, educational institutions and professional bodies to be proactive in developing employment and promotional pathways.</p> |
| Education and training for professional practice | <p>Ensure staff are appropriately prepared to deal with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander materials, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.</p> |
| Awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and issues | <p>Pursue the national aim of contributing to greater understanding between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples.</p> |
| Copying and repatriation of records | <p>Respond sympathetically and cooperatively to requests for copies of records of specific relevance to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community for its use and retention.</p> |

National Policy Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and Collections, Australasia

The *National Policy Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and Collections* (NSLA 2007) is designed to guide progressive action across national, state and territory library institutions in their plans and approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander library services and collections. Not surprisingly, the framework covers many of the issues described in the protocols. A number of additional points are raised, including:

- the need to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices are dynamic and always evolving;
- the importance of strategies to promote the preservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and to ensure they are supported by and reflected in collections;
- the importance of professional development for library staff, including training in pre-service professional programs; cultural training programs in professional preparation; and ongoing professional development of staff via internal activities and/or professional conferences, forums, publications, and the dissemination of innovative practices.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network, Australia

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network (ATSILIRN 2008) was established to meet the need for a support and information network for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders working in libraries and for those people servicing the information needs of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. The ATSILIRN website (home.vicnet.net.au/~atsilirn) provides access to the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services* and information about conferences and links to related material about Indigenous people and information services.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is a Commonwealth statutory authority within the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, which provides information and research about the cultures and lifestyles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Through this, AIATSIS aims to raise awareness among all Australians, and people of other nations, of the richness and diversity of Australian Indigenous cultures and histories. AIATSIS has a digitisation program which delivers electronic information resources and services to clients via the AIATSIS website (www.aiatsis.gov.au) and the Mura catalogue. The site currently includes Online Exhibitions featuring items such as selected messages from the Sorry Books, community newsletters, and selections from the rare book collection.

Libraries and Knowledge Centres, Northern Territory Library

The Northern Territory Library is the equivalent of a State Library, and among other things has responsibility for 22 remote libraries, predominantly located in Indigenous communities. Some are located in council premises; others are joint-use libraries located in high schools where they serve both the school and the community.

In response to requests from Indigenous communities for help in preserving and providing appropriate access to their cultural heritage, the Northern Territory Library implemented a new Libraries and Knowledge Centres program for these remote libraries in 2004. The model integrates traditional library concepts with Indigenous knowledge concepts, and builds on the services already provided through the community libraries.

As well as providing core library services such as English literacy and information literacy programs, the centres provide training and support for community members engaged in acquiring and preserving local knowledge. The centres also offer recreational activities to all groups within the community. A key component of the program is the Our Story database, which enables

communities to access and store digitised material related to their cultural heritage. The Ara Irititja software was selected after several products were evaluated. The database stores and displays any digital media so that photographs, sound recordings, videos and other resources can all be viewed through the one interface. The database allows for sensitivities such as removing the pictures of people who have died.

Many community library officers have taken on the role of database facilitators, identifying and gathering local content, training community members to use the database and facilitating the ongoing development of the content by working with community members to provide additional information and stories. An evaluation of the Libraries and Knowledge Centres model reported its potential to be a key infrastructure for building capacity in Indigenous communities (see www.ntl.nt.gov.au/about_us/knowledgecentres).

In 2007, the Northern Territory Library received the prestigious annual Gates Foundation Access to Learning Award. The US\$1 million award recognised the library's work in providing free computer and Internet access and training to Indigenous communities as well as its unique Our Story database. The award funds will be used to increase training opportunities for Northern Territory community library officers and library users, and expand the Libraries and Knowledge Centres programs in other communities.

Indigenous Knowledge Centres: the Queensland experience

The major priority of the State Library of Queensland's Indigenous Library Services Strategy (June 2002) has been the establishment of Indigenous Knowledge Centres in remote communities where there are no library services. The centres offer free community-wide access to the resources of a traditional library, supplemented with materials to support the oral and visual traditions of Indigenous peoples. As Sandi Taylor noted in her presentation to the 2004 Australian Library Industry Association conference, the centres are 'special

places to look after the songs, language, stories and traditions of their [the Aboriginal] culture' and also are 'a means to reach out to the wider global community' (Taylor 2004, p. 1).

The process of establishing the centres has involved challenging traditional library models and developing and exploring the potential for libraries to meet the knowledge needs of Indigenous peoples. Important characteristics of the model include:

- flexibility, shaped by the way a particular community articulates its knowledge needs;
- a two-way learning process between the State Library and Indigenous communities throughout Queensland;
- community capacity building as a pivotal component, beginning with community engagement.

The principles for social engagement and some of the successes of the centres are described in Taylor's paper, including the case of one centre offering training to the community in using the public computer to access Internet banking, rather than time-consuming and costly travel to the bank.

Koori Library Pathways Project, Shepparton, Victoria

A collaborative project between the Koori Resource and Information Centre and Goulburn Valley Regional Library Corporation is working to:

- ensure delivery of accessible and responsive library and information services to the local Indigenous community;
- preserve and safeguard local Aboriginal culture, knowledge and history;
- encourage greater understanding of Aboriginal people in the broader community through sharing of this information.

Cross-cultural awareness training programs are being run to heighten awareness among library staff of Indigenous issues, and to better equip staff to guide and refer the

public to relevant Indigenous resources and information. The early activities have included archiving weekends to sort through the centre's resources (providing an important stepping stone for the centre in recording its history), a review of Shepparton Library's Aboriginal materials, development of collection protocols, and creation of the Koori Library Pathways Project webpage (www.koorilibrary.8ways.net).

For more information, see *Libraries Building Communities Report 4: Showcasing the Best: Volume 2*.

Akaltye Antheme Collection, Alice Springs Public Library, Northern Territory

The Akaltye Antheme (Giving Knowledge) Collection at the Alice Springs Public Library attempts to provide to the Indigenous population resources that are relevant to their interests and English language literacy levels. Launched in 2002, the collection includes materials, published or unpublished, in a variety of formats, by, about, or for the Aboriginal peoples of Central Australia.

The Alice Springs Public Library has an Indigenous Services Officer position fully funded by the Alice Springs Town Council; this has had a major impact on the development of the collection.

The goals of the project have been to:

- present Indigenous knowledge with value and respect;
- provide an environment that supports family and group access to library services, such as email, CDs, web browsing and related skills transfer;
- provide information exchange between remote communities and across states and territories;
- provide access and sharing of information between people working out in the bush, often in isolation;
- place an expectation on people and organisations producing reports in Central Australia to produce them in a manner accessible to the people they are about, and for;

- provide access to the wider community of visitors and urban residents to real information produced by and for Aboriginal people.

Indigenous communities were approached to make available to the library locally produced resources, including books, magazines, videos and software. An agreement was reached by which the library can hold and manage the presentation of this material in a responsible and ethical manner. The criteria for accumulation of resources were that the process:

- involve consent, support and ownership by the Aboriginal agencies contributing to it;
- promote to the non-Indigenous audience positive information produced by and for Aboriginal people that negates the image of hopelessness often perceived by visitors to Alice Springs;
- include graphic information produced for readers with low English literacy, such as some Indigenous patrons and some tourists and migrants;
- promote access to computer technology and related skills transfer for family groups;
- promote communication across different agencies that work on remote communities.

To ensure that the Akaltye Antheme Collection is appropriate to the needs of the Indigenous community, it is housed on display shelves in rough Dewey order, with all book covers facing the public. This reflects the preference of Indigenous library patrons for images. A coloured spot system has been used for subjects such as landcare and health; this is intended to assist Indigenous people become familiar with the library system. Many items have been laminated and re-bound to withstand rough handling – to encourage heavy and repeated use by patrons who have little familiarity with the care of books.

Library services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in New South Wales, State Library of New South Wales

In 2004, the State Library of New South Wales conducted a survey of public libraries to document the collections and services that were available to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. This was seen as the first step in developing a proposal for in-depth research into the use and non-use of public libraries by Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. The survey aimed to determine the extent of current collections and services targeting Indigenous communities, and which public libraries employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and in what positions. To highlight the results, a seminar was held in May 2005 with the papers and survey findings published in August 2006 (State Library of NSW 2006).

Of 98 library services, 35 targeted library services, special events or programs to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in their communities. These included:

- monthly storytime with Aboriginal preschools;
- local Aboriginal classes visiting a library on a regular basis;
- NAIDOC Week displays, events and exhibitions;
- Reconciliation Week displays and events;
- talks with Aboriginal elders regarding local Indigenous history and elders presenting storytime;
- cultural awareness programs;
- creation of family history database (including photographs) and workshops and fact sheets on *Tracing Your Aboriginal Family History*;
- library participation in community festivals recognising the original inhabitants of an area;
- Aboriginal material selection days;
- permanent exhibitions at heritage centres;
- visiting authors and storytellers;

- recording relevant regional events;
- providing a venue for meetings for Indigenous groups.

Fifteen libraries had designated collections targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander users. Many libraries had collections about Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders but did not differentiate between their collections being for or about these groups.

Aboriginal Material Selection Day, Marrickville Council Library Services, New South Wales

In March 2004, Marrickville Council Library Services held an Aboriginal selection day where members of the local Aboriginal community were invited to select some material for the library collection. Two areas were targeted: material suitable for Aboriginal studies for high school and other students (as well as interested community members), and quality picture books for the junior collection. The community selected five suppliers, who provided material, information and book lists. A second purpose of the day was to strengthen the bonds between the library and the local Aboriginal community with a view to increasing Aboriginal membership and involvement in the library's activities.

Indigenous Marketing Plan, Great Lakes Library Service, New South Wales

Great Lakes Library Service has strengthened relationships with the local Indigenous community around Forster through Indigenous art. A local Indigenous art group redesigned the library's logo and, with funding from the Regional Arts Board, installed three major contemporary Indigenous artworks in the library and a mosaic on the front of the library (see www.greatlakes.nsw.gov.au/Library/downloads.htm).

Welcoming Places: Ideas for Public Library Services for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, State Library of Queensland

Welcoming Places tells the inspiring story of how public libraries in Cairns, Cooloola, Paroo, Thuringowa and Townsville participated in a project with the State Library of Queensland's Indigenous Services Team to improve services to their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (State Library of Queensland n.d.). The Listen here! project provided a part-time Indigenous project officer for six months and funding for programs. Some libraries also received a grant for collection development. Each library was asked to trial the following strategies: using an Indigenous reference group for guidance and support; organising public programs; creating an Indigenous presence in library spaces; and seeking advice to improve collections. The many different approaches and programs included art workshops during NAIDOC Week, storytelling for children, the launch of an Indigenous children's collection, an oral recollections project, scrapbooking workshops with elders, and a project to create a dictionary of local Aboriginal languages. The Listen here! project led to increased library usage and membership by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

A4 Accessing and using library services

The Connecting with the Community research project conducted focus groups with Indigenous Australians 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 Indigenous Australians. These are summarised and discussed below, often using the words of the Indigenous participants in the research focus groups.

The findings can, however, be summarised as two core and interrelated themes: a low level of awareness of the services offered by public libraries and a low level of use of public libraries, both personal and by peers.

| Factors influencing library use: Indigenous Australians | |
|--|--|
| Awareness | Low levels of awareness of the services offered by public libraries. |
| Engagement | No compelling reason for using library services. Use of alternative library services. |
| Library programs and collections | Limited collections and programs for and about Indigenous Australians. |
| Policies and procedures | Perceived discomfort in library environment. |
| Customer service | Limited numbers of or no Indigenous library staff. |

Low level of awareness of library services

Public libraries appear to have low 'brand awareness' among Indigenous Australians. There is a significant lack of awareness about what services public libraries have to offer and, like some other library non-user groups, Indigenous Australians who are not library users tend to have old-fashioned and stereotypical views of libraries and librarians:

When I walk into a library I expect to see what I used to see. Just aisles with books everywhere, and an old lady sitting at the reception desk, a grumpy old one.

The lack of awareness is compounded by there being insufficient library users in Indigenous communities with recent and relevant library experience to raise awareness or correct misunderstandings. Where there is some knowledge of the general role of libraries, any educationally related service provision or support is seen as the province of school or TAFE libraries.

No compelling reason for using library services

The lack of awareness and experience of libraries contributes to some Indigenous Australians having no compelling reason for using library services. When asked whether they have used their local public library, for some the question is puzzling and the answer is simply 'No':

I haven't had no reason to.

Not everyone can read.

When I went to school, sometimes they would take us down there and they got us all like a little card, and I have still got it now, like still got it, but never used it.

Libraries are places with books, and if you cannot read, why go to a library? From this perspective the logic is clear. If you want to access education, go to a school. If you want information about jobs, go to Centrelink. If you want to access a computer, ask a friend. Even where Indigenous Australians indicate that they have a need for access to literacy support services, education and employment support, and community information, there is no understanding that the library might be one place to go.

Use of alternative library services

Indigenous Australians in education, at either school or in vocational training, tend to use the libraries associated with their education provider as the sole source of educational resources. There is a natural connection between provider and service. When studying at TAFE, go to the TAFE library:

It's big and has lots of books.

In these cases, the educational library can become the de facto public library, as Indigenous library users tend to be communal users. That is, one person borrows and others use, and when that communal use is complete the book is returned. In addition:

If a brother gets a book from the TAFE library then it must be OK, so that is where I will go.

Limited collections and programs for and about Indigenous Australians

Indigenous Australians perceive that libraries have limited information, collections and programs for and about themselves, their history and their culture:

I reckon a lot of the libraries don't have Aboriginal stuff ... not enough information on Indigenous culture.

In some cases the perceptions are based on fact. Indigenous people have tried to use a library to find information about their ancestors, relations and connections, but have been unable to find any relevant resources, either because the library does not have access to them or they do not exist. Either way, there is no return visit.

In other cases, a library may have an Indigenous collection, but it may not be widely known among the local community. This is where 'ownership' of

the collection and having a role in its formation and maintenance is important. Indigenous people want to be in charge of how their culture is represented in the library. They have a history of ‘having things done to them’, rather than ‘being treated with respect’ and ‘being allowed to reclaim and share their culture’.

Another factor in this situation is for the library to distinguish between the characteristics of its Indigenous collections. That is, are they information, resources and services tailored and targeted for use by Indigenous people, or are they information, resources and services about Indigenous people? The latter might be of wider interest to all library users. The literature on Indigenous collections suggests that too often this distinction is not well made in libraries.

Overall, the belief is that it is ‘very rare to find Aboriginal stuff in libraries’.

Perceived discomfort in library environment

Library policies and practices can make libraries an uncomfortable place for some people and communities. Indigenous people can be quite wary of institutional situations:

When I got my learners I didn't want to buy the book and I didn't know anyone that had a book so I went down and borrowed it, and then I forgot that I had it, and I lost it, and then about four years later I found it but I was too shame to walk it in there and give it back so I just put it in the slot and walked off. Ha!

I wouldn't take my kids to the library 'cause they would just run amok mate.

Indigenous people also report more strongly than other library users concern about the negative feelings that arise when an overdue borrowed item is highlighted through a letter demanding the return of the item. This very often dissuades them from borrowing again.

Whether the reasons are rational or founded in fact, this perceived discomfort is a barrier to library use. Potential feelings of shame, uncertainty, shyness, being scared to ask questions and being seen as ignorant – these are all reasons not to attend a library. As a result, even people who have a need for particular information or resources may be reluctant to seek it out; they go without, and are deprived of an educational, employment-related or recreational opportunity.

Limited numbers of or no Indigenous library staff

Perhaps more than most, Indigenous people feel more comfortable dealing with someone they know or know of, and the same is true in libraries:

I go to ... I didn't feel like I wanted to deal with the others. I go straight and ask for what I want. So I need fella I'm comfortable with.

'Cause people that can't read or write or shy might be more likely to go to a person they knew and ask questions than a total stranger.

You can't ask questions of people at the desk.

Shyness would come into it too. Just asking for information, or having someone to access, who you feel comfortable with would probably make a difference. Maybe another Koori person.

The combination of a lack of awareness of libraries, limited use and recommendation by other Indigenous people, and discomfort in the library setting all add up to barriers to access and use of public libraries. This might be offset though if there were an Indigenous face in the library.

A5 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 Indigenous Australians is presented below.

| Opportunities for libraries to reach out to communities: Indigenous Australians | |
|--|---|
| Awareness | Promote access to library services to and through Indigenous communities. |
| Engagement | Position the library as a meeting place for Indigenous Australians and a place of Indigenous culture. Engage communities through Indigenous elders and children. |
| Library programs and collections | Develop library collections and deliver library programs for, about and through Indigenous Australians. |
| Customer service | Employ Indigenous library staff. Provide cross-cultural awareness training programs for library staff. |

The main way to get more Indigenous Australians to use public library services is to get more Indigenous Australians to use public library services. This may seem an absurd or cyclical argument, but in a community where connectedness is important and there is acceptance and comfort in referred familiarity and shared experience, if sufficient Indigenous people were regular library users then others would follow.

Promote access to library services to and through Indigenous communities

Public libraries can best promote the information, resources and services they provide to Indigenous people by working through the Indigenous people in those communities who are library users. Those who use

library services are an effective and trusted source of information for non-users, especially, but not necessarily, if they are persons with some standing in the local Indigenous community. Indigenous library users could be encouraged to 'bring a friend', host a tour of the library or take information about library services back to their community. They could be supported in these endeavours with targeted information and resource material specific to Indigenous library users, and images and faces that reflect Indigenous culture and use of the library.

Position the library as a meeting place and a place of Indigenous culture

In geographic locations where there is a significant Indigenous history and population, libraries could reach out to these communities by positioning themselves as a place that brings together key elements of Indigenous culture. More than just being a centre for local Indigenous historical, language and cultural collections, the library could, in the absence of other facilities, be a meeting place. That is, a place where the Indigenous community feels welcome, feels at home, and has a reason for being:

If you feel there's a part of the culture is in there you are more inclined to walk through the door.

I reckon, like, if Rumba [Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative] rang you up and said we are going to have the meeting at the library, I'd go.

I think it is a fantastic idea to have a Koori part of the library.

If other people were there, then I would go.

The initial reason for meeting might not be library-related: the library might be used as a community facility for social gatherings, mothers' groups and more. But it might be, through an Indigenous book club, storytime with an Indigenous flavour, events where elders tell their stories to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and activities designed to build and maintain the Indigenous collection.

Whatever the initial reason may be, once Indigenous people become familiar with and comfortable in attending the library and view it as a place with relevance and meaning, they are more likely to use the services available.

Engage communities through elders and children

Indigenous people identified two key groups that could be used to attract them to a public library: children and elders.

If libraries were seen as providing books, services and places that were attractive and beneficial to Indigenous children, their enthusiasm and their parents' interest in supporting the children's literacy, education and own cultural awareness would be enough to bring people in. Some library users noted that their children's encouragement to 'go to the library' had been a factor in their use of children's and other library services. Children could be familiarised with the library through school tours or special activities, such as storytime, book collections and holiday programs. Comfortable reading and learning spaces for Indigenous mothers with young and school-age children and literacy support for these children could be implemented.

The role of elders in influencing community attitudes and behaviours is also significant. Library activities featuring Indigenous elders telling stories, hosting storytime, talking about their personal experience, and talking about their people's culture would both give them further opportunity to bind their community and open Indigenous culture up to the non-Indigenous library users.

Develop collections and deliver programs for, about and by Indigenous Australians

Libraries could increase access and use by Indigenous Australians by working with local communities to develop, maintain and present collections and programs for and about Indigenous people. When asked what would make them interested to actually go into a library the answers were straightforward:

More Koori books.

Yeah. 'Cause you are more inclined to know people who are in the books. As well as a place where you go and access that information which you don't have in your homes.

If they had Aboriginal stuff in there people would go in, it's as simple as that.

Libraries should regularly stocktake their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collection, promote it to the community and share it with other library services. They should also engage local Indigenous people in the 'ownership' and maintenance of these collections as a community resource:

We can't have gubbas [white people] working in there looking after our culture. You have got to have an Aboriginal there.

Employ Indigenous Australians as library staff

Employment of Indigenous library staff is influenced by the staffing and resource levels, and access to suitably qualified Indigenous personnel. However, where it is possible to have Indigenous people on staff, the presence of a Koori face in the library would make other Indigenous people more comfortable and more likely to come to the library and ask any questions they might have.

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Further reading

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

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