READING AND LITERACY FOR ALL:

ADULT LITERACY
PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

STATE LIBRARY VICTORIA

Public Libraries Victoria Network

CREATIVE VICTORIA

Contents

Introduction

Reading and literacy for all: A strategic framework for Victorian public libraries 2015–18 describes the unique role of public libraries in reader and literacy development. Jointly developed by State Library Victoria and Victoria's network of 47 municipal library services and regional library corporations, the framework provides an overview of current library programs, identifies shared priorities for action to support improvement in reading and literacy outcomes, and establishes a robust approach to evaluating the impact of public libraries on Victorians' reading and literacy levels.

In developing the strategic framework through the 2014–15 Statewide Public Library Development Projects, Victoria's public libraries sought ideas and recommendations for a statewide approach to supporting adult literacy that could be defined and documented in 2015–16 and delivered in 2016–17. It was intended that examination of local, national and international examples of adult literacy programs in a library setting would guide development of an approach to support and build ongoing capacity in the public library sector to enhance adult literacy outcomes.

Victorian public libraries and relevant stakeholders engaged in a consultative process to explore the potential role of public libraries. Drawing on the research and consultation that occurred in developing the strategic framework, and within the context of that framework, this paper outlines the key findings on adult literacy programs in library settings and provides recommendations on future directions for Victoria's public libraries in contributing to raising adult literacy levels and outcomes within the community.

Adult literacy: the challenge

The ability to read and write is a basic life skill.

Literacy encompasses an individual's capacity to understand, use, reflect on and engage with written texts, in order to achieve goals, to develop knowledge and potential, and to participate in society.

As described more fully in the *Reading and literacy for all* strategic framework, literacy is an essential life skill for Victorians of all ages. It is fundamental to all learning, a building block of education and development, and integral to economic, civic and social participation.

Addressing low levels of adult literacy

While Victorians' performance on key literacy measures is as good as our national peers', it has shown little sign of improvement over the past decade. At the same time, literacy levels in the world's top-performing nations are improving rapidly.

Many people face barriers every day of their lives because they cannot read or write. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies; PIAAC) reports that in 2012 up to 46 per cent of Victorians did not have the literacy skills necessary to cope with the complex demands of everyday life and work in a knowledge-based economy. It is estimated that more than half a million Victorians aged between the ages of 15 and 74 years have 'very limited' literacy skills (literacy Level 1 or below, meaning that the person has difficulty matching text and information or drawing low-level inferences from simple print or digital text).

Low levels of literacy and education can also have serious implications for an individual's life and health outcomes (such as an increased likelihood of social isolation and mental health issues). A 2010 survey by the Australian Industry Group found that more than 75 per cent of major employers felt their businesses were adversely affected by low levels of literacy and numeracy in the workforce.

Recognising gaps in high-end literacy skills

Research on literacy development, and adult literacy in particular, indicates that there are varying levels of literacy, and that 'literate' and 'illiterate' are not two distinct categories. The International Adult Literacy Survey stresses that literacy is no longer thought of as 'a condition that either adults have or have not', and that literacy should no longer be defined as an 'arbitrary test' that separates those who reach a minimum standard from those who fall below it.

There are well-founded concerns in industry and among employers about current and potential employees with very low literacy skills. At the same time there are legitimate concerns about the number of Australians lacking high-end literacy skills that are needed in complex jobs, with OECD data showing that Australia has a lower proportion of adults with high-level skills than some other countries.

There is already a significant gap between the skills of workers and the literacy demands of the workplace, and some maintain that this gap will widen over the next two decades. The worker of the future will need to acquire increasingly complex literacy skills to communicate simultaneously across different work communities.

It is also known that literacy is dynamic, in that every individual's literacy will vary at different stages according to circumstance and skills acquisition. Some people who develop literacy and reading skills in the school years find these atrophy when they leave school and read less and less. Reading for pleasure is a key way to maintain and develop literacy skills. Libraries use reader development (promoting reading for enjoyment and building reading activities around existing interests) as a strategy to support adult literacy efforts.

Every individual's personal, social, economic and mental wellbeing is enhanced through active engagement in all areas of life: at home, at work and at leisure. And Victoria's future prosperity and economic success ultimately hinges upon the skills, productivity and dynamism of our workforce – all of which are jeopardised by adult literacy levels that do not meet expected standards.

Libraries and adult literacy

Public libraries have a natural advantage in supporting literacy development. Libraries are, and always have been, places of and for learning, that promote and encourage a culture of reading by providing free and universal access to books and related programs for people of all ages and interests.

Public libraries are free, open to all and widely accessible across the state. They have rich collections, active and engaging programs, and staff who actively encourage and support library users to read, access information and improve their language and digital literacy skills.

Victoria's public libraries have a strong history of active engagement in supporting literacy development for pre-schoolers (for example, through storytime and related programs aimed at children aged from birth to five years and their parents and carers). However, libraries' role in literacy development for adults – especially for adults with low levels of literacy – has historically been lesser.

This is also true in many overseas public library systems. Historically, libraries and librarians have supported the objectives of literacy but, except for children's and school services, they have not been at the forefront of literacy service development. This does not mean that there is no literacy development activity for adults in libraries, but it tends to be fragmented and lacking coherence across library services.

Current adult literacy activities

An audit of libraries' reading and literacy programs conducted in developing the strategic framework found that across the Victorian public library network there is both consistency and variability in how libraries support adult literacy.

Through their physical and digital collections every public library provides people of all ages with access to a variety of reading material – fiction and nonfiction books, magazines, newspapers and more. Through their programs most public libraries provide adults with opportunities to engage with one another in reading- and literacy-related activities.

- Around three in every four libraries have book clubs where people can share their reading experience – with clubs meeting on different days and times, reading different genres, and attracting different types of readers.
- Around one in three libraries have creative writing events, competitions or workshops that encourage adults to write.
- Around 40 per cent of public libraries provide adult literacy activities or English-language programs explicitly targeted at improving reading and oral skills for adults with low literacy levels. For example:
  - English conversation groups, classes and language cafés (especially in areas where there is a relatively high proportion of people who do not speak English as their first language)
  - access to online adult literacy programs, such as the International English Language Test System (IELTS)
  - library tours for adult education students.
- Many libraries have targeted adult literacy and/or English-language collections that can be used by adult learners to improve their literacy skills.

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

A selection of local and international adult reading and literacy programs and resources are referenced in the appendix.

Stakeholder perspectives

The *Reading and literacy for all* strategic framework was developed with input from stakeholders within and outside the library sector, recognising the important roles of different individuals and organisations in improving literacy outcomes and achieving greater levels of reading for pleasure. These included the Department of Education and Training; adult learning providers such as registered training organisations (RTOs) and Neighbourhood Houses; and associations with explicit interests in literacy and English-language development for adults.

This consultation highlighted several key points about the adult literacy challenge and the potential role for public libraries in supporting literacy development.

- There is real (but often hidden) demand for adult literacy support in every municipality in Victoria. While the demand may vary from place to place, it is never zero.
- The increasing push for government service provision to occur, or be mediated, online heightens the importance of every citizen having adequate reading and digital literacy skills.
- Public libraries are generally not very active in programming that explicitly supports adults with low levels of literacy, although it is with this cohort that there is the greatest opportunity for positive impact. Many libraries report that they do not have the capacity, skills or resources (for example, in program design and delivery, partnership development) to take a lead role in delivering adult literacy programs. Many libraries do, however, have targeted collections that could be used by adult learners to improve their literacy skills.
- Libraries tend to be more active in supporting reader development programs for adults with moderate to high levels of literacy. These 'informal learning' approaches are sometimes adapted and targeted to those who wish to develop literacy skills.
- Where public libraries (such as 26TEN in Australia, and California Library Literacy Services in the USA) have chosen to implement an explicit adult literacy program it has often involved the learner being matched with an individual 'tutor' (often a trained volunteer).
- Family learning programs (provided by libraries or other organisations) can also address adult literacy, drawing on research that shows that the desire to support their children in becoming literate is a strong motivation for illiterate adults to become literate themselves.

- There is often a range of (potentially competing) adult-literacy providers in any given community, including Neighbourhood Houses, Community Learning Centres, Learn Locals and other registered training providers.
- The lack of strong connections between libraries and local training providers can be partly explained by their having different primary funding streams (that is, local government vs state government). Nevertheless, at a strategic level there is an interest in public libraries and local providers working more closely to leverage resources and capabilities and optimise community outcomes.
- Adults who have difficulty reading or writing often develop coping or masking strategies that enable them to live and work without having literacy skills that are often taken for granted.
- Adults can feel stigmatised by not having good reading or writing skills, and may avoid or resist any direct approach to offer them access to an adult literacy program.
- Approaches involving family learning or digital-literacy development can be an effective and non-threatening way of enabling adults to find out about and access relevant adult and community education programs.
- While many people see the library as a welcoming and inviting place in the community, people with a low level of literacy may be intimidated by an institution centred on books and reading.

Opportunities to support adult literacy

There is at present considerable interest at Commonwealth and state government level in examining ways to raise adult literacy levels as a means of increasing workforce productivity and improving quality of life. This includes investment in the education and training system to better equip learners with the language, numeracy and digital literacy skills they require to successfully undertake accredited learning.

This gives rise to the following questions.

- What role(s) might public libraries play in supporting improvement in adult literacy levels (recognising and leveraging the strengths of public libraries)?

- What might be the key features of libraries' approach to delivery and/or support of adult literacy programs?

- What capabilities do Victorian public libraries require to successfully fulfil this role (these roles)?

Public libraries have three broad options with regard to supporting adult literacy – including general improvements in reading and writing and improved language literacy (through English-language programs).

- Directly deliver adult literacy programs.

- Collaborate with, facilitate and support provision of adult literacy programs delivered by other providers.

- A combination of these approaches.

The features typical of the first two approaches are outlined in the following table. In practice these would be adapted to suit local circumstances.

Option	Features
Directly deliver adult literacy programs	• Defined target audience – e.g. people with low-level English-language skills, persons assessed as being at Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) Level 3 or below • Program designed in line with agreed educational standards and an agreed curriculum • Program delivered over a fixed timeframe (e.g. 6 to 8 weeks) or open-ended until participant achieves learning goals • Program delivered in a non-threatening environment • Trained class leaders or tutors (e.g. volunteers) • Complementary program resources accessed through library • Promotion through community networks
Collaborate with, facilitate and support provision of adult literacy programs delivered by other providers	• Strategic service and support relationships with adult-literacy providers (e.g. Learn Locals, Neighbourhood Houses, RTOs) • Articulation and implementation of libraries' processes for identifying and assessing adults who might benefit from literacy support • Articulation and implementation of protocols for referring people from the library to an allied provider • Cross-promotion of allied providers' adult literacy programs • Provision of physical and digital collections to support adult-literacy providers' programs (accessible within the library and/or from the providers' facilities) • Facilitated access to library meeting rooms for tutoring and learning activities • Hosting library tours for adult literacy classes and ensuring easy member sign-up

Recommendations

Victoria's public libraries can, and currently do support improved adult literacy outcomes in a variety of ways. However, in most libraries the provision of relevant collections and programs is fairly passive and does not seek to respond directly to the learning needs of adults with low levels of literacy. It might also be argued that the presence of other community-based program providers should be a signal to libraries to avoid competitive activity in what is understood to be, for participants, a sensitive field of personal development.

Therefore, it is recommended that in the short- to medium-term individual public libraries could best contribute to improving adult literacy levels in their communities through action in three key areas.

Recommendation	Action
1. Strategy	Every public library examines its current approach to supporting adult literacy, and is more explicit in its strategic and operational planning about what it chooses to do and why. In this process libraries: • acknowledge the adult literacy challenge at a local level • acknowledge the natural advantages of public libraries in supporting literacy development • match programming with local resources and capability.
2. Service	Subject to the outcomes of Recommendation 1, every public library continues its current formal and informal efforts to support adult literacy. For example: • 'easy read' collections for adults • conversation classes for people with English as a second language • book clubs for adults at all reading levels • online access to adult literacy programs (licenced and non-licenced) • 'combined' language and digital literacy activities • development of intergenerational literacy through well-designed early years programs.
3. Partnerships	Every public library seeks to establish collaborative partnerships that support the work of local adult-literacy providers (see the second option on p. 6).

At a statewide level State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network could strengthen their strategic engagement and advocacy role through action in the following three areas.

Recommendation	Action
4. Capacity building	Libraries strengthen their strategic capacity to support adult literacy outcomes through partnership development and program design and delivery. Relevant professional learning may be delivered through the Statewide Public Library Development Projects.
5. Representation	State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network establish a more formal relationship with the Adult, Community and Further Education Board – a statutory authority with a role in planning and promoting adult learning, allocating resources, developing policies and advising the Minister on matters related to adult education in Victoria.
6. Aggregation	State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network compile information from all public libraries on their strategic and program support for improving adult literacy, with the aim of publishing an annual statement on public libraries' contribution to adult literacy levels in Victoria (for planning purposes within the public library sector and for advocacy purposes beyond the sector). This could include: • statistics on adult literacy levels in Victoria • statistics on relevant library programs, activities and resources, and participation in and use of those library services • examples from Victorian public libraries of good and innovative practice in adult literacy support.

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Appendix: Adult literacy programs and resources

Adult literacy programs

Public libraries can and do provide a range of programs to support development of adult literacy. Some examples follow.

Better beginnings

www.better-beginnings.com.au/programs/adult-program/read-anytime-anywhere-anyhow

In 2004 the State Library of Western Australia developed *Better Beginnings*, a universal family literacy program with targeted services for Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse families. The program adopts a whole family approach, recognising the impact that intergenerational learning and parental involvement bring to literacy, education and raising attainment for all family members. The development and establishment of Better Beginnings has shown the value of proactively exploring new ideas and opportunities and playing a leadership role to establish new partnerships for public libraries to extend services to their community. In 2010 the WA State Government recognised the program's success by committing a further $6.8 million over four years to extend and expand the program. Building on the program's success, WA has now developed *Read! Anytime Anywhere Anyhow* to promote the enjoyment and value of reading for pleasure in developing basic literacy skills and confident readers. The target audience is identified as adult readers who do not usually see themselves as readers or have 'lost the reading habit'; as well as emerging and less confident adult readers – that is, those who can read but who have yet to build reading enjoyment and experience, including those with low literacy levels.

California State Library

libraryliteracy.org

California Library Literacy Services (CLLS), a program of the California State Library, provides services to adults with low-literacy and their families through California public libraries. Over 20,000 adult learners each year are provided one-on-one or small-group instruction by thousands of trained volunteer tutors in over 500 locations. Instruction is based on each individual learner's pace and goals. The program targets English-speaking adults who struggle with basic reading and writing skills. Training is provided to volunteers through the CLLS.

A mobile library literacy service uses mobile classrooms to deliver literacy and other services to 'hard to reach' and other underserved families in many parts of the state. Many participants in these programs go on to become volunteer tutors so that they can give back to the community.

The Queens Library's Adult Learner Program

queenslibrary.org/services/adult-literacy/adult-learner-program

The Queens Library in New York has seven Adult Learner Centers that provide services, resources, and lifelong learning opportunities to the communities of Queens. The centres have full-time professional staff and volunteers who tutor literacy groups and facilitate English for Speakers of Other Languages conversation groups. The centres also offer basic adult education classes, video groups, writing groups and technology-assisted instruction, as well as ongoing tutor training by professional staff.

The Reading Agency

readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/six-book-challenge/

The Six Book Challenge run by the Reading Agency in the UK builds people's reading confidence and literacy skills, improving their life chances. Reading Groups for Everyone celebrates all of the good things that happen when people come together to share reading, and Reading Well supports people's health and wellbeing.

Another program, Quick Reads, sets out to challenge the belief held by many adults that books are 'not for them' or are difficult or boring. Each year the agency commissions well-known authors to write short books specifically designed to be easy to read. These are the same as mainstream books in every respect but are simply shorter and easier to tackle for adults who are less confident in their reading skills. The books are then sold through major retailers and online booksellers and loaned from libraries. Since 2006 Quick Reads has distributed over 4.5 million books and registered 3 million library loans. Through outreach work hundreds of thousands of new readers, often from hard-to-reach communities, are introduced each year to the joys and benefits of reading.

Research and publications

BEST PRACTICE IN ADULT LITERACY

'UK public libraries: Roles in adult literacy provision' by Carla McLoughlin and Anne Morris reports on a research project that examined the role of UK public libraries in addressing adult literacy. The study notes a range of successful strategies used by libraries.

Approaches for supporting adult literacy. The libraries used reader development extensively as a strategy to support adult literacy efforts. Staff tied literacy offerings to other programs or services of interest (for example, promoting adult literacy services alongside audio-visual collections and internet access). Adult learners were also targeted for library tours, reading groups, and assistance with book selection for the literacy collection. Some libraries hired new staff from outside the library profession, choosing candidates with prior experience in basic skills development or community work.

Methods of attracting adults with poor literacy. Partnership was identified as a key strategy for attracting adults with poor literacy. Libraries formed partnerships with numerous agencies, including the probationary service, a community centre (where the library's 'reader in residence' was installed), a college and a car manufacturing plant. Networking with other literacy service providers and coalitions was also an important strategy, particularly as a way to increase the library's profile as a literacy service provider.

Sustainability and mainstreaming. Early planning for sustainability was crucial. Incorporating funding for literacy staffing and collections into libraries' core budget and annual plans was also an important step. While some libraries hired new staff, and one library staffed the literacy project with volunteers, using existing staff for adult literacy work proved to be more efficient and sustainable. Instilling a sense of ownership in the project for both staff and users of the literacy services by involving them in the development and promotion of literacy service and collections was another strategy employed to ensure longevity of the service.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF EXEMPLARY ADULT EDUCATION AND LITERACY PROGRAMS

Key points from this publication produced for Partners for Sacred Spaces by the Public Health Management Corporation in Philadelphia include the following.

Respect for adult learners. A distinguishing characteristic of adult education programs is that program content and language must be suitable and respectful of adult clients. For example, instead of using the word 'student' which may imply a traditional teacher/student relationship where a student is subservient to the teacher, all program materials use the word 'learner' or 'customer'. Using this type of language acknowledges the adults' existing knowledge and real-world experience and makes them the focus of the program.

Appropriate materials. Some programs that have provided educational programs for children may have learning materials and textbooks that they think they can use with older learners. However, this is not an effective way to teach adults and participants may be turned off from a program that uses children's books for their teaching materials.

Space. The physical environment where an adult learning program takes place should be well-lit, clean and suitable for adults. Additionally, having computers available helps learners and staff to access online resources. Many learners want to improve their computer literacy as well as language or numerical literacy, so having a computer lab is valuable.

SUPPORTING ADULT LITERACY IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES
salipl.org/ebook.pdf

This ebook by Kristy Cooper explains how libraries can help to bridge the adult literacy gap by partnering with a local adult literacy program or starting a one-on-one volunteer adult-literacy tutoring program at the library. It provides a toolkit covering topics such as how to connect with adult literacy programs in your area; how to build a literacy collection; and how to advertise for learners.

PROJECT TEAM

Project sponsor .... Debra Rosenfeldt, State Library Victoria
Project management ... Robyn Ellard and Jayne Cleave, State Library Victoria

Writers .... Ian Phillips and Carol Oxley, I&J Management Services
Editor .... Jane Thompson
Design .... Chocolate Designs

PROJECT WORKGROUP

Tania Barry, Hume Libraries

Natalie Brown, Greater Dandenong Libraries

Anna Burkey, State Library Victoria

Joseph Cullen, Eastern Regional Libraries Corporation

Pam Giumarra, Melbourne Library Service

Jane Grace, Yarra Plenty Regional Library

Chris Kelly, Goldfields Library Corporation (Spokesperson)

Christine McAllister, Brimbank Libraries

Kathie Olden, West Gippsland Regional Library Corporation

Genimaree Panozzo, Moreland City Council

Carole Smith, Darebin Libraries