

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE CENTRES - THE QUEENSLAND EXPERIENCE SIX YEARS ON

Author(s)¹

Lyn Thompson

Policy and Project Officer

Indigenous Library Services, State Library of Queensland

Renee Colless

Senior Project Officer

Indigenous Library Services, State Library of Queensland

State Library of Queensland
Cultural Centre
Stanley Place
South Bank Qld 4101

lyn.thompson@slq.qld.gov.au

renee.colless@slq.qld.gov.au

ABSTRACT

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE CENTRES – THE QUEENSLAND EXPERIENCE SIX YEARS ON

The State Library of Queensland has established 17 Indigenous Knowledge Centres in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Councils since 2002, with a focus on communities which previously had no access to public library services. Indigenous Knowledge Centres can be understood as a key infrastructure element to build capacity in local communities and throughout the region. Sustainability of Indigenous Knowledge Centres requires effective responses to the challenges of local government amalgamations, welfare reform and increasing freight costs. The State Library of Queensland is committed to partnering with each community to support the development of this vital piece of community infrastructure and communities' aspirations for cultural maintenance, economic development and improved educational outcomes.

To provide a local insight into these issues, Tanaio Anau, the Indigenous Knowledge Centre Administrator on Boigu Island, describes community involvement in the Island's Indigenous Knowledge Centre and its impact on the Island community since it was established in June 2006. Boigu Island is situated in the top western group of islands in

the Torres Strait, approximately 140 km from the nearest administrative centre on Thursday Island and just six kilometres south of Papua New Guinea. Tanaio Anau outlines and evaluates the IKC programs and activities, covering traditional library services (including information and communication technologies) to a place to capture and preserve the Island's local history and traditions. The prospects and challenges in the implementation of a three year partnerships plan are examined highlighting plans for global learning, literacy and enterprise projects focusing on development of a local book series for children and tourist product development showcasing the Island's history and culture.

BODY OF PAPER

The State Library of Queensland aims to be a leader in the provision of library services for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. We actively support connections through Indigenous Knowledge Centres (IKCs) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and through collaboration with public libraries, as part of core business at the State Library.

IKCs are owned and operated by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Councils. They promote the love of reading, the value of learning and the transfer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander skills, knowledge and culture. The State Library partners with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Councils to develop and support the establishment and operation of the IKCs.

Enriching the lives of Queenslanders: Strategic directions for the State Library of Queensland towards 2012 is the State Library's strategic policy and it sets a solid agenda to achieve an ambitious program over the next four years in terms of its range of quality services to the public from the redeveloped building at South Bank, via its online presence and through collaboration with the State-wide public library network. A key component of the strategy is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services. State Library actively supports the improvement of library and information services to Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in Queensland. It supports the establishment of libraries in all Indigenous communities and the development of appropriate collections, projects and programs to be delivered at State Library and throughout the public library network.

In 2002, the State Library of Queensland embarked on a strategy to establish Indigenous Knowledge Centres (IKCs) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities primarily in remote locations in Cape York and the Torres Straits working in partnership with local Councils in these communities. Most of these communities had never had access to a local library. There are currently 17 IKCs in Queensland.

This paper explores how services have evolved over the last six years since the first IKCs were established, the challenges that have been faced and the opportunities for established and future IKCs as well as a case study on Boigu Island IKC and its impact on the community since it was established in June 2006

What is an Indigenous Knowledge Centre?

An IKC combines the traditional functions of a public library with a role which affirms and strengthens Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identity as a vital source of individual and community strength and pride. IKCs are communal spaces that offer traditional library services, vibrant community engagement programs and can serve as keeping places and small local museums.

IKCs are run in partnership with local government in much the same way as the State Library partners with small non-Indigenous councils to provide public library services in regional areas. Councils are responsible for the physical infrastructure, staffing and day to day running of their Centre, while State Library provides collections (books, magazines, audio visual materials and computers etc), staff training and support and assists in bids for external funding for literacy, recreational ICT and other projects and skills development and works with IKC staff and partners to deliver such projects.

IKCs operate in the following Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:

Torres Straits: Badu, Mabuiag, Kubin, Iama, Poruma, Erub, Boigu, Dauan.

Northern Peninsular Region: Seisia, New Mapoon, Injinoo

Cape York: Aurukun, Pormpuraaw, Lockhart River, Wujal Wujal, Hope Vale.

South East Queensland: Cherbourg.

Establishment and sustainability

The process of establishing viable IKCs within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has evolved over the last six years. As each community is different, with different needs and different challenges, State Library has worked in partnership with the local councils to identify issues and look at implementing viable solutions. A phased approach has evolved when opening new Centres and there is now a model which focuses on developing partnerships in the planning stages with a range of agencies and benefactors and a greater emphasis on literacy and ICT training for communities

The phased approach ensures that State Library works with and consults with each of the communities and gives the communities and councils the power to shape their IKC for their particular needs. Another important aspect of the IKC setup is that all parties are aware of their responsibilities in the running of the IKC. These responsibilities are agreed upon under a Service Level Agreement, which is signed by State Library and the local council.

In the setup phase, State Library provides the collection, some equipment and furniture as well as advice on the choice of programs, selection of resources, layout and design of their IKC and training for the IKC Administrator. The council provides the building and employs staff and manages the ongoing running of the IKC. The setup of the IKCs has been a collaborative approach that involves Council, community and State Library in the physical setup of the facility and this sets the scene for the ongoing collaborative development of an IKC.

It is and always will be about the ‘capacity and capability levels’ of councils and designated staff in these centres to be instrumental in becoming ‘knowledge change agents’ in their own communities. Introducing basic library and community engagement training for the local people employed in IKCs is key to their future success.

The *Indigenous Knowledge Centre Learning Community Framework for Library Management* has been developed to respond to the knowledge needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The framework is based on inter related functions, incorporating a community library model, a keeping place role which includes creating, storing and maintaining cultural knowledge, a business research function that aims to support the council’s strategic planning processes and other business related activities and a strategy to partner with a range of government and non-government agencies in the delivery of services. Whilst there is great potential for delivering a vast array of life long learning programs, projects, community and educational training initiatives at IKCs, it is critical that the Centres are developed at a pace that suits each community and that resources are available to sustain the programs offered. Community engagement programs are vital in generating interest and providing access to literacy, learning and recreational activities. The development of complementary partnerships and programs will facilitate the sustainability of the IKCs by providing programs which enhance the skills of individuals who access the services and benefit the community.

Successful programs that have been run in the IKCs over the past six years have included:

- *I Can Sing I Can Read* program, a karaoke music based literacy project.
- *Have you Heard* which had listening stations and audio books
- Summer reading club programs
- Children’s activities such as colouring in, story telling, puzzles and puppets.
- Homework classes/kids clubs
- Community access to computers for banking, email and general information.
- The Taking IT On project which provided basic computer training in communities with Commonwealth government funding.
- The State Library’s Children’s Picture Diary Project
- Arts and craft activities such as crocheting, painting, making cards and calendars.
- Movie afternoons/nights

Challenges, Responses and Opportunities

The State Library has faced many challenges in supporting Indigenous Knowledge Centres over the last six years. These include:

- Working within a rapidly changing environment at the government and community level, to build good relationships with councils and their communities in order to engage them in the establishment and development of these centres, has at times been very difficult.
- Political pressure to deliver services without adequate planning, resources and community buy in

- The tenuous nature of funding within Council for the salaries of staff employed in IKCs. In all but one IKC, staff are funding through the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) which only provides about two days per week of salary. This impacts on the opening hours of the IKCs and results in them being closed after school and during holidays. Sourcing additional funds in partnership with council to complement IKC staff salaries is another challenge. The lack of real jobs in communities contributes to difficulty in attracting staff with the requisite skills, high turnover and low skills development.
- The Welfare Reform agenda now being trialled in four communities, two of which have IKC jobs funded through CDEP, presents a new challenge as funding is needed to ensure these jobs continue after the trial period has passed.
- Addressing and working through the sustainability issues as part of a whole of government approach. The State Library is a small statutory body within the Queensland government. This presents challenges in gaining recognition at the table with large government departments and agencies with their own. If better coordinated, duplication of resources could be minimised and resources such as ICT and training better utilised
- Huge costs in delivery of training and support services to IKC staff, e.g. the annual meeting of all IKC Administrators costs \$40,000 for 3 days training, much of which is for travel. The tyranny of distance also presents problems in organising travel and accommodation for IKC Administrators and State Library staff on field visits which are affected by extreme weather such as floods and cyclones, travel restrictions and limited accommodation and flight options.
- High freight and communication costs and a general lack of basic retail and other services of all kinds in communities.
- Unreliable internet access and a lack of ICT technical support and skills in communities. Often the communities have a very small population base with poor education and skills which results in a lack of capability to support ICT

The State Library has responded to these challenges in a number of ways. Many of these responses which are outlined below refer to more than one of the challenges above. New opportunities have also emerged to address some of the problems, particularly with developments in ICT which offer solutions to improve communication and delivery of training of IKC staff using tools such as Skype and videoconferencing as well as for innovative projects. For example, the State Library has responded to the interest shown in communities to access documents and photos about their own history and culture held in their own communities and in other cultural institutions. A new project *Keeping Culture Strong* is being piloted in several communities to develop the IKCs as keeping places for culture and give local people the ability and the skills to share and interpret their culture and heritage using digital, Web 2.0 and other emerging technologies.

The need to scope the community's interest and capacity and capabilities prior to establishing an IKC is now recognised and addressed. The roll out of IKCs to the remaining 17 remote communities will be done when each of the communities is able to champion and resource the IKC. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are now

far more engaged in the initial planning. The engagement period is as flexible as possible, not tied to or driven by our agenda. Champions within the community and Council are sought and nurtured in the early stages of negotiation with Council. Local people with suitable skills are recruited where possible for positions in IKCs in the preliminary planning stages.

Engaging local government and relevant players to support their roles and responsibilities to managing IKCs is now well-embedded in the process through such initiatives as local IKC advisory groups and service level agreements (SLAs). SLAs currently exist between the Library Board and all of the IKC Local Councils. The SLA clarifies both the State Library of Queensland's roles and responsibilities and the Council's roles and responsibilities in respect to the provision and development of library services through the IKC. In addition, the State Library's *Learning Communities Framework for Library Management*, establishes a framework for the management of IKCs which is based upon a revised and more sustainable model which focuses internal SLQ's resources on the existing IKCs. The model also focuses on developing partnerships with a range of agencies and benefactors and an expanded role in literacy and ICT training. The new Hope Vale IKC which opened on 21 July reflects this model.

Partnering opportunities with other service providers at the non-government organisation (NGO) level, inter-agency and intra-agency are a high priority. The State Library is well placed to take advantage of these strategic partnerships as the model of IKCs gives all service providers the basic infrastructure on which to build, as well as ready access to the community through the relationship with the IKC Administrators. This has a spin off in that the Council, already stretched in its service provision, could then delegate to the IKC such activities as training vocational care programs, research projects, after school activities and vacation care projects.

Strategic partnerships are being developed with such bodies as the State's Regional Manager Coordination Network and its associated sub-committee of Indigenous Service Delivery, the Australian Local Government Association's Regional Organisations of Councils of Cape York,, Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, Cape York Partnerships, other government agencies in particular the Queensland Departments' of Communities and, Local Government, Sport and Recreation and the Commonwealth Department's of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs' Indigenous Coordination Centre, the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts and the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations.

Welfare reform is a challenge but it also provides a unique opportunity for partnering and the development of a sustainable model for IKCs due to the intense interest and government investment the trial attracts. The reforms aim to restore social norms and local authority and change behaviours in response to chronic levels of welfare dependency, social dysfunction and economic exclusion in certain communities. These problems are endemic in many of the communities where IKCs are located. The communities do not have access to facilities and services many of us take for granted, including home ownership, entertainment such as movie theatres, computer access and

even basic retail outlets like newsagents (for magazines and papers) banks, or access to government services such as Department of Transport for licences, registration or payment of fines etc. An IKC equipped with functional computers and internet access provides an opportunity for the community to access services that the majority of Australians enjoy in every day life.

Case study: Boigu Indigenous Knowledge Centre

Boigu Island is the most northerly inhabited island in Australian territory. It is part of the top western group of the Torres Straits Islands. Boigu is located 135km north of Thursday Island, and is 6km off the mainland Papua New Guinea. The Island covers an area of 6,630 hectares and is mainly swamp land. Most of the island is subjected to extensive flooding, and as a result, the community township was built on the highest point of the island. Two smaller nearby islands, Aubisi and Moimi islands are not permanently settled but are considered part of Boigu Island.

Boigu Island has a population of approximately 340 people. Community members speak Kala Kawaw Ya or KKY, the dialect of the western group of Islands.

Prior to the establishment of the IKC, the community did not have access to a local library. Members can now use the resources of a traditional library, supplemented with materials to support the oral and visual traditions of the Torres Strait Islander history and culture. The IKC has also given the community another place to meet and host a range of activities. Current IKC Administrator is Tanaio Anau, supported in her role by Scott Gibuma, Island Manager and former IKC Administrator.

The IKC is situated within the Rural Transaction Centre (RTC). The RTC is a Commonwealth Government initiative, providing a building from which a range of services are delivered. The building is an extension of the Council building and is as individual and innovative as the community it serves.

The IKC was established June 2006 and became operational in October 2006 when the State Library's Federally-funded Taking IT On training was delivered to the community. The official opening took place on 25th July 2007, by Ms Lea Giles-Peters, State Librarian from the State Library of Queensland.

Challenges, Outcomes and Opportunities

The Boigu IKC presents many of the challenges outlined earlier. The distance and remoteness from a major centre, employment, training and support of IKC staff, ongoing funding and lack of ICT and other infrastructure support all impact upon the sustainability of the IKC. However, by working with the community and government and non-government partners, the IKC with State Library has delivered some major outcomes. There are several new partnerships and projects underway and the IKC is well-embedded as a hub of community engagement and leisure with a strong and committed interest in the IKC by the entire community.

In October 2006, State Library's Taking IT On trainers spent two weeks in community, offering basic computer training through the IKC. The community embraced the training

with 36 people attending. A return visit in May 2007 for one week was again very successful with 20 people who had attended the training in October 2006 returning for more. Another 14 new community members joined in and developed their ICT skills through the project.

The *I Can Sing, I Can Read* program, developed by the State Library, uses the traditional and powerful media of music to build the educational foundations of literacy, lifelong learning and self esteem. Boigu IKC has engaged the local community through the selection of music, hosting karaoke competitions for both children and adults and it has been and continues to be a very popular and successful school holiday activity for the children.

A strong relationship has been established with the local school, Malu Kiwai Campus of Tagai State College, the Torres Strait's main provider of secondary education. To date library competitions have been run in conjunction with the school to promote the library and school classes come to the IKC for library time. The *Away with Words* Literacy project is another program in partnership with the Tagai State College, the Commonwealth government through its Priority Communities Assistance Program (PCAP) and the State Library through the IKC network. It delivers a series of three school-based and one holiday writers' and illustrators' workshop engaging students/elders in the creation of narrative stories based on a culturally appropriate natural phenomenon. Boigu IKC working with its Malu Kiwai Campus is one of four IKCs in the Torres Strait that will provide the community with the opportunity to develop, publish, and own their stories – a pathway to learn and create.

The *Let's Read* program is an exciting initiative to promote reading and preparedness to read with young children from birth to 5 years and their families. The consultation to establish a culturally appropriate program is being run through the IKC network in the Torres Strait Islands focussing on the islands of Kubin, Mabuiag, Boigu and Erub. This consultancy, in partnership with Melbourne Children's Hospital and The Smith Family, could see the roll out of the *Let's Read* project through the network of IKCs throughout Queensland.

In March 2008, local government reform saw 15 Island Councils amalgamated into one Torres Strait Regional Council. This will provide an opportunity for IKCs in the Torres Strait to be firmly embedded in Integrated Local Area Planning of the Torres Strait Regional Council and there is greater potential to develop economies of scale in service delivery and professional support as a network of Torres Strait Island IKCs.

Funded by the State Library, the annual IKC Administrators Workshop is being held this year in Cairns in September. The "Together we make it happen" workshop will deliver face-to-face training to the local IKC Administrator to effectively carry out their duties as well as giving them concrete skills for their own professional development. Developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) provide greater opportunities to support IKC Administrators through such mediums as Skype and video conferencing.

Community involvement is a major factor in the success of the IKC. Boigu's IKCs high community profile is maintained through the IKC administrator's persistence at providing information to all community members. The IKC has had strong support from the former Chairperson and Council, and now the new Regional Council. The IKC has become a community hub, a conduit for government services to feed their information into a community, but more importantly a place for the community to engage and create cultural knowledge for their own benefit and to provide them with more educational, social and cultural opportunities.

Conclusion

While there are many challenges in the delivery of library services to remote communities through IKCs, the State Library has been recognised as a leader in the field. The State Library's Indigenous Library Services with offices in Brisbane and Cairns was the winner of the Queensland Government's Partnerships and Recognition Award in 2007 for its role in improving library services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people throughout Queensland and its significant contribution to advancing reconciliation.

Ms Olivia Robinson, an Aboriginal staff member based in the State Library's Indigenous Library Service was awarded a Queensland-Smithsonian Fellowship to research innovative Indigenous engagement strategies at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian in an immersive experience over 26 weeks from March to September 2008. Ms Robinson is the first Indigenous Australian to receive a Smithsonian Fellowship.

Furthermore, IKCs are now starting to achieve external recognition for their service delivery. The Winifred Fisher Indigenous Knowledge Centre in Cherbourg won a Library Board of Queensland Award in 2008 from a competitive field for its services to the Cherbourg community. These services range from providing a library to Cherbourg State School students through to playing a traditional role as a Community Library, with more than 800 people using it every month during the school year.

The development of the IKCs in Queensland has been crucial in achieving community literacy aspirations, lifelong learning and support for the culture, history and knowledge of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders and the Boigu example shows how this is achieved. The new model of partnership now in place at Hope Vale IKC is another step forward and will facilitate the provision of improved services to all communities in the future. That said, it must be noted that all libraries have a responsibility to support Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders to maintain, preserve, create and share their knowledge in an environment based on the recognition of cultural protocols, diversity, intellectual property and cultural ownership.

REFERENCES

State Library of Queensland (2008), *Enriching the lives of Queensland Strategic directions for the State Library of Queensland towards 2012.*

State Library of Queensland (2007), *Indigenous Knowledge Centres Learning Community Framework for Library Management.*

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PRESENTER

Renee Colless

Renee lives in Cairns and comes from the Kuku Yalanji (Laura), Kunjen (Kowanyama) clans. Renee is the Senior Project Officer at the State Library of Queensland in Cairns. Renee's vision is to understand more about her identity and continue to blend between the two worlds successfully with her family by her side. Renee is best described as a perfectionist, passionate, flexible, adaptable, and committed. Renee's greatest achievements are her Bachelor of Applied Science in Community Development and Community Management, travelling and experiencing different cultures, ten years working in Indigenous Affairs for the Australian Government and crossing paths with other inspirational speakers.