

# Community Building in Regional Australia: The *Creative Volunteering* Training Program

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## Abstract

Many of the community organisations that sustain cultural life in regional Australia are run entirely or mostly by volunteers. These organisations are a vital part of the nation's cultural capital and they increasingly need skills in planning, marketing, obtaining resources and building networks to survive. A specially designed program, *Creative Volunteering – No Limits* has been developed to train community-based volunteers in these and other essential skills in regional communities throughout Australia. The program was run successfully through 500 workshops in 125 Australian regions over 2003–2004.

While it originated from the cultural sector, this training program has proved relevant to a broad range of community organisations and to small businesses in often isolated rural communities, and appears to have met its community building and cultural development objectives. This paper discusses the background to the program, the philosophies that underpinned its development, and key factors that led to its success. Findings from the program evaluation show that *Creative Volunteering* has strengthened existing organisations, and encouraged extensive community networking between organisations and individuals. New cultural and other community activities have been planned or implemented by people who attended workshops, and many of them report that they have gained the confidence necessary to work with change as a consequence of taking part in one or more of the workshops.

## Keywords

Volunteers, training, cultural capital, regional, arts

## Background

The ideas underpinning the development of the project that became *Creative Volunteering* are based in the policy realms of cultural development, community wellbeing and the development of human, social and cultural capital (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002).<sup>1</sup> One of the widely recognised indicators of social wellbeing is a high level of volunteer activity within a community (ABS 2002; Gauntlett et al. 2002; Hird 2003; Sandeman et al. 1999) In their review of existing research on

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<sup>1</sup> The ABS discussion paper on social capital and social wellbeing uses the terms human and social capital. Cultural capital as used in this paper is clearly closely identified with social capital, with an added emphasis on cultural activities and institutions. Australian Bureau of Statistics papers will hereafter be cited as ABS.

community wellbeing, Gauntlett et al. (2002, p. viii) found "that there is increasing recognition of the importance of community participation and the role that community groups play in developing healthy communities". Their research also found that the building of social capital through community-based programs is facilitated when opportunities exist:

- "to enable skills development in areas such as organising groups, running meetings, lobbying, the writing of grant applications and so on
- to enable the identification of funding sources and the capacity to bid for these funds
- to build better links with other community groups and organisations ..." They identified knowledge and skills, including volunteering; networks and partnerships and community leadership as among the five key indicators for stronger communities and civil society (Gauntlett et al. 2000, p. 5).

Voluntary work is a key indicator of active citizenship. It is an important contribution to national life of Australia, meeting a wide range of needs within the community and helping to develop and reinforce social networks and cohesion. (ABS 2001a) The Australian Bureau of Statistics survey of voluntary work defined a volunteer as someone who, willingly gives "unpaid help, in the form of time, service or skills, through an organisation or group". In 2000, nearly 4.4 million Australians volunteered in their communities — nearly one third of the total population.

Nearly 2.5 million<sup>2</sup> Australians were involved in some form of paid or unpaid work relating to selected culture and leisure activities in the twelve months preceding April 2001. Of these cultural workers, nearly two thirds (approximately 1.6 million) were unpaid. These volunteers in arts and cultural organisations in 2000 made up over six per cent of Australia's population. The full extent of the volunteer contribution to arts and community life is difficult to document, but the available figures show that cultural organisations throughout the country depend very heavily on volunteering to maintain their contribution to the country's cultural and social capital.

Many areas of the arts industries are sustained by part time and casual workers and by volunteers (SARAT 2002). For instance, small museums and community heritage collections rely heavily on volunteer staff. In June 2000, there were 2049 museums in Australia, the majority of which (58 per cent) were operated exclusively by volunteers. Eighty per cent of all people who worked in museums were volunteers (ABS 2001b, Deakin University 2002). The majority of small museums and community heritage collections are run entirely by volunteers and most are in regional or remote locations.

Outside of the capital cities, reliance on volunteers is very high. Cultural life in regional Australia is rich and diverse and is run almost entirely by volunteer-based organisations such as arts councils, theatre groups, music groups, museums, and groups that exist to stage local festival and events.

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<sup>2</sup> This represents 16.8 per cent of the Australian population aged 15 and over.

These organisations are small and frequently struggle for resources. Their income streams typically come from three areas: sponsorship, government grants and door sales or box office. To build, or even maintain, income, they increasingly need skills in planning, marketing, obtaining resources and building networks to survive.

At the same time as policies relating to social wellbeing were taking shape, arts and regional development agencies were framing policies that identified the need for community-based programs that could build skills in community leadership, community arts, community development and the 'ability to embrace and capitalise on change' (Regional Australia Summit 2000a). There has also been significant discussion of the role of the arts in creating cultural capital and community wellbeing, (cf. Mills and Brown 2004). A third strand of public discussion and policy making centred round the need for training for volunteers across all sectors. For example, at the completion of the International Year of Volunteers, Volunteering Australia's summary policy document argued that training for 'volunteer-involving' organisations should be widely available and portable (Volunteering Australia 2001) (which meant that it had to link into a national system of recognition and therefore accreditation). Training in regional Australia formed one of the themes of the Regional Australia Summit in 2000 (Regional Australia Summit 2000b). Here, the discussions identified the role of training and lifelong learning in building community capacity in readiness for community based planning and the need for cross community collaboration and partnerships. The summit also acknowledged the role of 'vocational education and training in regional education and lifelong learning provides the capacity to manage change'. At around the same time, a longitudinal study conducted by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia was finding that the impact of vocational and educational training on social and economic wellbeing is through building these capacities: skills, confidence, networks and job readiness (Centre for Research and Learning nd)

Against this background, Regional Arts Australia developed a proposal to develop skills and confidence in volunteer cultural organisations in regional Australia. The inspiration for this project and its implementation were built on policies to develop cultural and social capacity for cultural and other community organisations, and the individuals (mostly volunteers) who sustain them.

### **Regional Arts Australia**

Regional Arts Australia is the national peak body for the Australia-wide network of regional arts organisations delivering arts programs in regional Australia. In this role it acts on behalf of the communities and artists of regional, rural and remote Australia in representing and resolving at a national level the issues, concerns and resource needs pivotal to the development and maintenance of a viable regional arts industry and a vibrant cultural life. Regional Arts Australia recognises how crucial the arts and culture are to community development generally and the role that the arts play in building community pride and regional distinctiveness. It is therefore concerned with all of the elements identified in the previous discussion that connect community wellbeing, cultural capital, and development of community cultural life in regional Australia.

Regional Arts Australia aims to:

- advocate at local, state and federal level to ensure that the arts in regional Australia are appropriately recognised and resourced
- lead the development of national policies, programs and projects that foster and encourage the development of the arts and the contribution of the arts to community development in rural and remote Australia
- plan, develop and manage national regional arts conferences, seminars, workshops and forums
- develop strategic partnerships with appropriate national organisations to implement major arts initiatives designed to raise the profile and enhance the development of the arts in regional Australia.

It is made up of the respective state and territory based regional arts organisations: Arts NT, Country Arts SA, Country Arts WA, Queensland Arts Council, Regional Arts NSW, Regional Arts Victoria and Tasmanian Regional Arts. The membership base of these organisations is the arts councils which work in the regions throughout Australia, and which are run entirely by volunteers. Regional arts make a tremendous contribution to the cultural, economic and social wellbeing of the nation. Regional Arts Australia acts as an advocate for these widely dispersed voluntary cultural workers and for active cultural life in regional Australia. It is an important partner in equipping local artists; arts workers and communities to meet the special needs and challenges that accompany arts practice, arts promotion and audience development in regional and rural areas.

In an address to the Regional Australia Summit in 1999, Ken Lloyd<sup>3</sup> spoke of the increasing difficulties faced by cultural organisations in obtaining resources to run their activities, and highlighted the need for a nationally available training program for volunteer workers in the arts and cultural industry across Australia. He said:

“These volunteers represent a significant arts and community resource across regional Australia. However, the volunteers are usually poorly resourced and have little or no access to skills development programs. Much could be done to improve training and skill development opportunities for both individuals and communities and as a consequence, improve the ability of regional communities to develop and manage significant arts and cultural programs” (Lloyd 1999).

### ***Creative volunteering – No limits***

In 1999, with the support of Australia Council for the Arts, Regional Arts Australia conducted consultations to scope the development and design of a national training program for arts and cultural volunteers working in regional Australia. In 2000 Regional Arts Australia sought funding for a national volunteer skills development project from the Australian Government, and in October 2001

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<sup>3</sup> Ken Lloyd is the Chief Executive Officer of the South Australian Country Arts Trust, (which trades as Country Arts SA), and has been the President of Regional Arts Australia since 2004.

gained \$1.2 million over three years through funding programs for the International Year of the Volunteer. The project was jointly funded through the Department of Family and Community Services and the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. After 12 months of development work by Regional Arts Australia and Flinders University, the Federal Arts Minister, Senator Rod Kemp formally launched the program titled *Creative Volunteering – No Limits* alongside the first pilot workshops on 18 October 2002, in Mount Gambier in the South East of South Australia.

The content of the training program was developed around the needs of volunteers as identified through Regional Arts Australia's consultations and through a needs analysis undertaken by Flinders University. The training methodology was built around the assumption that while they would have a wide range of backgrounds, all volunteers attending the workshops would bring both experience and questions, and that the learning process should therefore be highly interactive and encourage participants to contribute from their own knowledge base and to ask questions. A workshop format was chosen for delivery because it would facilitate this interactive learning style, and because a full module could be delivered in one day workshop. The benefits of full day workshops included reducing the number of trips that volunteers would need to make to attend classes – many of the volunteers needed to travel long distances to the nearest regional centre where workshops might be held. This format also suited the volunteers' need to fit their volunteer activity into lives that are usually very busy, and it is easier to plan to devote one or two whole days to attending a workshop than to make a number of diary commitments.

The following principles, based on the needs of volunteer workers and community organisations, were developed by the project team, and have underpinned the development and implementation of *Creative Volunteering – No Limits*:

- The empowerment of regional communities would be a priority focus for training and development activities.
- Project activity would support the raising of the professionalism in the cultural sector.
- Training would be available to a wide range of people, including volunteer workers, artists, students, cultural practitioners, board or committee members of community organisations. Because paid workers often play a crucial coordinating and facilitating role in cultural organisations, it was decided that they would also be able to attend the workshops, along with local government staff working in cultural development or similar positions.
- The Commonwealth required that the training be accredited through the national training accreditation system. This requirement had to be integrated with the client group's need for training to be flexible in both mode and content.
- It was essential that the training was delivered in the regions, not in the capital cities where training is typically offered. The registered training organisations that delivered the training were selected in part on their ability to deliver in the regions. Where possible, suitably qualified trainers from regional areas were employed by the training providers.

- The training program had to be designed so that quality control and standards were achievable in a highly decentralised delivery mode. It had to be tailor-made to suit both the individual and the communities' employment and development opportunities.
- Training needed to be delivered in ways that met the needs of volunteers as well as paid workers in the sector.
- Training should deliver the generic skills and knowledge needed by any community and cultural organisation, and some targeted specialised interest areas as well.

The curriculum that was developed around these principles and then delivered, is called *Course in Creative Volunteering*. It differs from other volunteering training courses in that it is designed to empower the volunteer workers themselves, not as a course in managing volunteers. By building the skills, confidence and capacity of the volunteers who carry out most of the work in community organisations, the capacity of the organisations themselves is strengthened.

The course is made up of six modules that are presented as self-contained one-day workshops. There are four core modules which concentrate on the generic planning and management skills identified through consultation. The topics are relevant to hands-on work typical of volunteers working in the arts, museums and heritage sectors across Australia and those identified as being a priority for sustaining the future of their organisations. The core modules cover business planning, marketing, generating income and other resources, and networking within communities. They were designed so that they are relevant to any small community organisation, and are also relevant to small businesses in regional areas. Additional modules were developed for two special interest areas: festival and event management and for organisations that manage collections, such as museums. These form the elective components of the course.

To meet the needs for flexible outcomes, the program was set up so that participants would receive recognition, in the form of a statement of attainment, for completing any single module from within the course, or they could take the full course in the *Course in Creative Volunteering*. To do this, participants need to complete all four core modules, and one of the elective modules.

Resources were developed to support the delivery of the program and include a set of comprehensive workbooks and facilitators' guides for each module. Evaluation of the program has shown clearly that these workbooks are one of the keys to its success. They are written in simple language so that they can be easily understood; they present the essential knowledge required to be able to perform the tasks set in each module, they contain exercises which are carried out during the workshops and which are assessable and they include other exercises which can be carried out back in the volunteers' organisations. Each workbook includes an example of a hypothetical organisation which is going through the same steps as the workshop participants. These helped greatly, for instance, in showing how an objective can be used as a basis for setting strategies and an action plan. The workbooks are therefore both in-class learning materials and resource books

designed for ongoing use within the organisations. The introduction to each workbook contains a section similar to the one below, which is drawn from the *Carry Out Business Planning* workbook (Greenwood and Russell 2003, p. 4).

“The Business Planning workbook will take you through each stage of the business planning process for a not-for-profit organisation.

Contact information is included for you to find additional help after the workshop.

Your facilitator will take you through each section step by step, and then invite you to complete each stage of the planning process in the Business Planning template at the back of the workbook. Each stage of the planning process is presented as a practical exercise to assist your learning and to help you to develop a Business Plan for your organisation.

*Work at your own pace*

The workbook has been designed for you to work at your own pace. If you do not have all the information to finish a topic during the workshop, attempt part of it and then move on to the next topic with the group. You can fill in the blank sections when you return to your organisation and you are able to find the information.

As you gather information after the workshop, further stages may be completed and transferred to the Business Planning Template. When all sections have been completed, you will have gained an understanding of business planning and will have completed the framework of a Business Plan for your organisation.

For business planning to be truly successful it should be a process that involves many people in the organisation.

After this workshop, you may wish to organise a planning day with other members of your organisation using this workbook as a guide.”

It is clear from this introduction that participants are being reassured that they need not attempt to complete the whole workbook during the workshop, but that they should take it back to their organisations with what they have learned and involve others in the learning and planning process. While the content of each workbook differs according to the topic, the same messages are given in each one about the processes of learning within the workshop and within the organisation after the workshop.

A facilitators' guide was prepared to accompany each workbook. In this, facilitators were encouraged to use the experience and knowledge of the workshop participants as an active base for learning, and to generate local examples to illustrate the content of the module wherever possible. This was designed to ensure that the workshop delivery responded to local needs and situations, as well as to recognise individuals' ability to contribute to the substance of the workshop.

The training delivery included monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in order to inform its development and provide evidence of outcomes of the project. At the conclusion of each workshop,

participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire, which was administered and processed in such a way as to ensure anonymity for participants. Results from these questionnaires were compiled and analysed on a continuing basis, so that any management issues could be addressed immediately. After the first few workshops, where there was some inconsistency in results, the response from participants in the workshops was overwhelmingly positive. Over 90 per cent of all workshop participants submitted completed evaluation sheets immediately following the workshops.

Responses from these forms showed that learning methodology, the learning materials and the workshop format were achieving the success that had been hoped. It also appeared that the facilitators were actively encouraging participation from all those present at workshops. There was little variation between states or between modules on these variables, which indicates that the workbooks and facilitators' handbooks were able to be used successfully in all regions, by many different facilitators, with participants from a wide range of backgrounds and interests, and across the full range of topics covered by the workshops. Some of the main findings averaged over all workshops from March 2003 to May 2004 are summarised here.

- Over 92 per cent of all respondents indicated satisfaction with the materials around which the workshops were based.
- Their satisfaction with facilitation rates was very high overall: over 98 per cent of all respondents indicated they were encouraged to take part in discussion and 88 per cent of respondents agreed that their skills and experience were recognised in the workshop/s they attended.
- 97 per cent indicated that they were satisfied with the workshops overall.
- Over 90 per cent of respondents found the [often donated] venues to be suitable/comfortable with appropriate facilities.
- 88 per cent indicated that they will be able to use what they have learned immediately.
- Over 48 per cent indicated the best method to find out about future workshops was by email, followed by information coming to them direct from their volunteer organisation and then by direct mail.
- More respondents said that they were interested in pursuing individual workshops than they were in pursuing a formal qualification.
- There was a high level of interest amongst volunteers to further their knowledge and attend other workshops.

As well as asking a series of questions designed to elicit quantifiable responses, the survey form asked participants to make general comments on any aspect of the workshop, facilitation and materials. These comments gave the program managers a broader indication of what respondents valued from their workshop experience, or what they didn't like.

The following is just a small sample of this general feedback from participants.

- *It's the best course I've ever done. It got me my present job as Youth Development Officer. I learned to write programs, manage projects and put anything in writing. It's a really successful tool in opening anything up for anyone and everyone should do it – paid workers or volunteers or anyone.*
- *Totally enjoyable, I have new ideas I can now put to work.*
- *Thoroughly enjoyed the workshop and believe that what I have learnt I can put into practice in my work, thank you.*
- *As an organisation I believe we benefited greatly. As for myself, I feel more able to believe in the unbelievable.*
- *As with the last 2 workshops in Hedland FABULOSO. The module content will be of use immediately.*
- *Has given me clear direction and actions to be done immediately — good.*
- *Very appropriate information for the program that we are running.*
- *Truly enjoyable the workshop experience will be very useful for future events and work I plan to do.*
- *Thanks for the opportunity to participate in this workshop in a regional area*
- *I thought the presenter was fantastic, as a veteran of many events I thought I had little to learn. [Facilitator's] knowledge proved me wrong. I learnt a great deal — well done*
- *Fantastic presentation covering an enormous amount of material that was relevant to me as a new volunteer in a small rural museum. Very inspiring.*
- *I felt I have gained valuable expertise and I have enjoyed the day.*
- *Very enjoyable day, great bunch, swapped stories, ideas, tactics, good experience of group learning.*
- *Good to have the information in large print and in one booklet. Good not to have to write all the time.*
- *Good session – very informative with a diverse range of subject and participants.*
- *The clear simple workbooks are useful.*
- *This has a lot of potential not only in my volunteer organisation, but also in my professional/personal life. It has the ability to be easily shared with others in my organisations. I felt that all participants were treated equally & individual needs were met by [facilitator's name].*

To assess the program's longer term value, both to the individual participants and to their organisations, a survey of participants was held in July and August 2004. A randomly selected sample of people who attended workshops between March and November 2003 was interviewed for each of the six modules delivered within the program. This meant that a reasonable amount of time (at least seven months) had elapsed since the workshop/s for all those interviewed, so that the responses would indicate whether or not the material had been used within the target community organisations. The stratified sample of 153 people was selected so that participants from all six

modules and from all states and the NT were proportionately represented. This survey aimed to evaluate a number of aspects of the project, as listed below.

- How volunteers have used what they have learned in the workshops to benefit their organisation/s
- Whether the community networking objectives of the project have been met — have the contacts and network opportunities made during the workshops been maintained?
- Were there any personal benefits to volunteers
- The patterns of volunteering activities of the participants. Questions were therefore asked on the period for which each respondent has been a volunteer; how many organisations they volunteer for, and in what capacity.
- What level of training volunteers had prior to workshops and what were their particular areas of interest for further training
- To gain an indication of the program's suitability for use by other community organisations as well as its primary target in the cultural sector.

The summary findings from this retrospective evaluation showed that the workshops have been used by workshop attendees in a number of different ways, and that the pattern of use has some variations between workshops. The findings most relevant to the project's community building goals are:

#### *Usefulness to community organisations*

Learning in the workshops has been applied within community organisations in a variety of ways. General benefits for organisations whose members undertook training were identified primarily as networking, communication and exchanging skills and ideas.

Most participants said they had benefited from the opportunities offered to connect with other organisations. In four out of the six workshops, participants said that they had used the specific knowledge area covered by the workshop in a directly related activity within their organisations. These workshops were Carry Out Business Planning, Plan and Program Events, Network Within Communities and Develop Funds and Resources. For the other two workshops (Undertake Marketing and Work with Collections) respondents felt that the workshops had benefited them in a general way and a significant number of those who attended the collections workshops felt that they had gained confidence to make changes.

Specific benefits identified for participants' organisations varied from workshop to workshop. For instance, responses from participants in the Network with Communities module identified benefits to their organisations as:

- 48 per cent networking with other organisations
- 20 per cent reinforcing existing knowledge

- 11 per cent helped in a general sense.

Other benefits mentioned from this workshop were that the workbooks were excellent resources and that the workshops were useful to help set up new organisations

Two-thirds of the participants in the Develop Funds and Resources workshops used the workshop and workbook to develop funding applications, and over 20 per cent used it to help develop new organisations.

The Business Planning and Festivals and Events modules were used most for business planning or event planning respectively, and more than half the participants in the Undertake Marketing workshops said that the module assisted them with marketing in general.

The Work With Collections module showed a different pattern, with 60 per cent indicating that the module had helped them in a general sense, and that 32 per cent felt it had given them the confidence to change what they had been doing.

#### *Benefits to individuals*

In addition to the organisational benefits gained, 93 per cent said that they had benefited personally from attending the workshops. Multiple responses could be made in answer to this question so that respondents could report all the ways in which workshop/s have benefited them personally. The factors identified as personal benefits were:

- 31 per cent said that the workshops had reinforced their existing skills and abilities
- 24 per cent said they learned new skills
- 23 per cent identified networking with others as a personal benefit
- 18 per cent felt that since attending the workshop their confidence had increased
- 40 per cent said they had widened their networks and opportunities since attending the workshops
- 37 per cent felt that they had gained satisfaction from learning
- 1 per cent gained employment.

These personal gains are also likely to benefit the organisations to which the participants belong.

#### *Community networking*

Nearly two-thirds of respondents have maintained some form of contact with other people who attended the same workshops. This has been by a variety of methods including networking and communication (58 per cent), exchanging of skills and ideas (18 per cent) and through developing useful links with other organisations (17 per cent). Participants found this contact to be useful to their organisations, and networking was identified as the major benefit flowing from this continued contact.

More linkages have been made between community organisations, thus strengthening local networks.

Twenty-six per cent of respondents said that they have felt encouraged to get involved with other community organisations. The majority of participants who have not become involved with other organisations said that they were already over-committed and were trying to cut back on their activities as they 'have no time'. The 26 per cent of respondents who were encouraged to become involved with other community organisations say they have become involved through:

- the development of new ideas/enthusiasm (40 per cent)
- passing on their knowledge (32 per cent)
- others who have not become involved with another organisation at present, expect that it will help them in the future (eight per cent).

#### *Past and future training*

Most workshop participants had not undertaken any previous training (61 per cent). The 39 per cent who had taken part in training before cited previous learning environments that ranged from informal workshops and on the job training to TAFE<sup>4</sup> or university courses.

A majority of respondents (57 per cent) were interested in further training, especially in further training through the *Creative Volunteering* program.

#### *Volunteer profiles*

The results showed that the volunteers who participated in the workshops were highly committed to volunteering and that many of them were very experienced. More than half (56 per cent) of the volunteers attending the workshops said they have been volunteering for more than seven years and about 70 per cent dedicate more than fifteen hours a month to volunteering. The majority volunteer for more than one organisation. Most workshop participants were women (82 per cent), and the majority were over 45 years of age. The single largest age group was the 45–54 year olds, followed by those aged 35 to 44.

The project objectives required that the Creative Volunteering training program be developed so that it was sufficiently flexible to apply in non-arts community organisations. Fifty-eight per cent of all respondents identified themselves as volunteering in cultural organisations. These included Regional Arts organisations, arts councils, theatre companies, historical societies and museums. The remaining 42 per cent came from a broad range of community organisations including Country Fire Authority, youth organisations, women's organisations, welfare organisations, and organisations

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<sup>4</sup> Technical and Further Education. TAFE is a major provider of vocational and educational training (VET) in Australia.

working to benefit children. One identifiably Indigenous organisation was represented in the survey sample.

The overwhelmingly positive responses to the workshops from both the end-of-workshop surveys and the retrospective feedback indicates that volunteers from non-arts community organisations have already taken part in the program and found it useful. The material in the workbooks and the delivery method therefore appear to be applicable for a wide range of organisations, though the arts focus of the case studies could usefully be amended for different interest groups.

### **Partnerships**

The project was built on a partnership model, in which the partners included the Commonwealth government, state and local government agencies in all states and the Northern Territory, non-government agencies in the arts, heritage, community development and volunteering sectors, registered training organisations and Flinders University. A large part of the success of the *Creative Volunteering – No Limits* has been because of the networks and partnerships that have been used, extended and formed throughout the program.

All the partners involved saw that this program could (and did) offer a significant opportunity to improve the viability and sustainability of community based organisations in regional Australia that depend on volunteers to keep them afloat. Although partners did not all use the language of growing social and cultural capital, or developing social wellbeing, they all shared a belief in the cultural value of voluntary organisations and the importance of strengthening those organisations through strengthening the abilities of their members to run them effectively.

At the national level, Regional Arts Australia facilitated the involvement of key national peak bodies in the cultural, volunteer and training sectors as a reference group to give advice about the overall direction of the project. This Reference Advisory Group met every six months throughout the development, implementation and evaluation of the program and had considerable input into shaping the course content and delivery mode for the program.<sup>5</sup> Flinders University was a key partner in the development of the curriculum, workshop methodology, training resources and program evaluation.

During the early stages of implementation, with the support of a professional development fund from the Australian National Training Authority, Regional Arts Australia established a Community of Practice involving the people who would be at the forefront of the management and delivery of the training and drawing in the expertise of the reference group and Flinders University. This funding allowed key players from all around the country to meet and talk through issues relating to the style and content of the training; the administrative arrangements for delivery in over 100 regions; and

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<sup>5</sup> Organisations represented on the reference advisory group include: Regional Arts Australia, Museums Australia, Volunteering Australia, CREATE Australia (the national industry training advisory board) and Flinders University.

how to achieve a reasonable assessment process. After an initial two day workshop, the Community of Practice, made up of the registered training organisations, state regional arts agencies and Regional Arts Australia staff, communication with this group has continued regularly via teleconferencing and email. Issues arising at a state level were often addressed amongst the group and solved collectively within this format.

The Regional Arts Organisations in all states were the local managers of the project. In each state and the Northern Territory they selected the locations and timetables for the delivery of workshops, bearing in mind local variables of climate, harvest season, distance and other local factors. They organised the distribution of resources, marketing, participant registration, venues and travel assistance. The regional arts organisations used their extensive regional networks to put the program in place and whether a workshop went ahead or not was often dependent on having a person on the ground who was an ambassador for the project. This person was often a volunteer who was heavily involved in their community. Many different local organisations have contributed in kind to the project, including local arts councils, service clubs, community organisations and venues. In some states local government made a significant contribution through providing venues, catering or subsidy for volunteers to attend.

The organisations that delivered the training were key partners in the project. The criteria used to select the registered training organisations included the requirements that they be willing to deliver in the regions, that they were familiar with the needs of volunteer based organisations and that they were willing to follow a community development model in training delivery. Following an open tender process, five organisations with a focus on community development were selected : They are:

- Community Cultural Development NSW
- Community Arts Network SA
- Ausdance Victoria
- Volunteering Queensland
- Western Australia Council of Social Services (in partnership with Community Arts Network of Western Australia and Edith Cowan University School of International, Cultural and Community Studies).

Each of these organisations delivered the training across their different states, with cross border delivery to the Northern Territory and Tasmania provided by Community Cultural Development NSW. Wherever possible, local trainers were used to facilitate workshops with the aim of gradually extending the network of trainers available in the regions as the project expanded.

The training organisations worked closely with the regional arts organisations throughout the project in conducting the training and evaluation and it has been their links with each other and into the community that has really made the project work at the local level. Other organisations from the

museums, history and heritage areas have also been involved in supporting the project in different ways in different states.

Late in 2004, the trainers themselves were brought together to discuss issues specifically relating to the teaching and learning methodologies, the workbooks, strategies for working with people with special needs and assessment. This gathering took the form of a wonderfully dynamic two day workshop, at the end of which the trainers had learned a great deal from each other, as they shared ideas and strategies for working creatively with groups to maximise learning, and to encourage participants to network within and following the *Creative Volunteering* workshops.

### **Summary of *Creative Volunteering – No Limits* project outcomes 2001–2004**

The training program developed and implemented from 2001 to 2004 has delivered a wide range of outcomes. A summary of these outcomes follows.

1. A nationally recognised course consisting of a series of stand alone, one day workshops has been developed and delivered to nearly 4500 volunteers across regional Australia.
2. In the 18 months to August 2004, 500 workshops were given in 120 different towns across Australia.
3. Over the life of the program, participant feedback showed a consistent overall workshop satisfaction rate of 97 per cent.
4. Over 80 per cent of respondents in the retrospective survey indicated that they have used what they have learned in the workshops within their organisations. Networking with other organisations was one of the main benefits they identified.
5. Almost 93 per cent of respondents in the retrospective survey said they had also benefited personally from attending the workshops, particularly in terms of confidence building.
6. A skills development model based on national, state and local partnerships has been established.
7. A network of trainers and subject experts working in regional areas has been established and continues to grow in numbers, experience and skill sharing.
8. A comprehensive set of resources suitable for use by a wide range of community organisations has been developed, tested, published and made available on line through the national volunteer resource centre.<sup>6</sup>
9. Regional arts agencies and Registered Training Organisations have expanded their networks and increased their knowledge and understanding about regional cultural volunteers, training needs, delivery and assessment of training to volunteers in regional locations.
10. New partnership have been established for training in the regions and there is increased collaboration between regional arts agencies and Registered Training Organisations.

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<sup>6</sup> These can be accessed on the website of the Australian National Volunteer Skills Centre <<http://www.nvsc.org.au/index.html>>.

11. There is increased collaboration between national peak bodies in the arts, museums, libraries, heritage, history, volunteer and training sectors.
12. Through this program there has been greater collaboration with Australian Government agencies supporting the work of volunteers in regional Australia.
13. The project has provided a model for skills development in the regions for the cultural sector, which is also applicable to other sectors such as sport, community services and emergency services.
14. Significant potential for using this model for expanding training has been identified, particularly by libraries, and the history and heritage sectors.

Critical success factors for the program included:

- designing training content and methodology specifically to meet the needs of the targeted groups. This was based around the workbooks and facilitators manuals developed for each of the modules, and the active encouragement of workshop participants to share their experience and knowledge within the workshop environment.
- holding workshops in regional centres, close to where the target audience lives and works
- working with a flexible model of delivery that would meet the different needs of different communities, while maintaining quality control through clearly expressed guidelines that were developed collaboratively through the Community of Practice model
- building and maintaining strong partnerships with a wide range of organisations across many sectors and all levels of government as well as many non[-government organisations. The strength of these relationships and the trust engendered through them underpinned the whole project, and made possible the flexible approach mentioned above.
- selection of registered training organisations with a commitment to cultural development, and, in turn, their selection of trainers who also held these values.

The success of the program has been such that the Commonwealth Government<sup>7</sup> has committed funds to extend the training program for an additional four years, on top of the initial three year grant. At least two new modules will be developed in response to suggestions coming from the volunteers, the partner organisations and the trainers. One of the new modules will concentrate on governance and risk management issues within community organisations. The other will focus on effective communications and people management and how to achieve good internal and external customer service.

## Conclusions

Evaluations of the *Creative Volunteering – No Limits* project show that it is delivering both tangible and intangible benefits identified as criteria for building social and cultural capital. Individual participants report that they are more involved in their communities than they were before they

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<sup>7</sup> Through the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts.

attended the workshops, and that their involvement is more effective. They have established and maintained relationships with members of other organisations, and embarked on new joint projects. Volunteers with extensive experience have shared their knowledge and have helped new organisations form and existing organisations to do things in new ways, using the workshops and workbooks as guides.

Participants have taken back to their organisations the skills they have developed in areas such as those identified by Gauntlett et al. as facilitating the development of social capital (Gauntlett et al. 2000, p. viii): organising groups, running meetings, lobbying, the writing of grant applications; identifying funding sources and developing the capacity to bid for these funds. In addition, participants have the opportunity to learn how to plan and stage an event to raise funds and promote community agendas. All workshops encourage the building of better links between community groups and organisations, and the Network within Communities module is devoted entirely to this activity.

The development of the capacity to manage change was one of the factors specifically mentioned in connection with training and lifelong learning at the 1999 Regional Australia Summit (2001b). The *Creative Volunteering – No Limits* program is designed to assist change within community organisations, by providing the information base and practice for participants to plan their activities, identify potential partners and sources of support and measure their effectiveness. The responses from participants show that they are relishing the opportunity to embrace change management in this way. A particular source of pleasure to those of us involved in developing the workshop design and content is that so many respondents said that the workshops had given them the confidence to make changes in the way they and their organisations do things.

The additional four years funding from the Commonwealth government gives the project the opportunity to build on this promising start, and to continue to strengthen the cultural and social capital and the wellbeing of regional communities throughout Australia. It will also enable the partnerships built in the first phases of the project between arts, heritage, education and volunteering organisations, to develop and strengthen further over the next four years. This will bring benefits for each of those organisations and, hopefully, the cultural capital of the country.

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