

Stats and Stories

Executive Summary

Stats and Stories: The Impact of the Arts in Regional Australia is a research project undertaken by academics in the Business School at Deakin University, led by Professor Ruth Rentschler, funded by Regional Arts Australia and the Australia Council for the Arts.

About the research project

In reviewing a wide range of literature on regional arts, including national and international academic studies, reports and ABS statistics, the researchers identified important themes that highlight the value of regional arts across Australia. They found that regional arts activities support the strengthening of community connectedness, social inclusion, civic pride and community identity as well as providing opportunities for regional development and economic regeneration. Some of the key ideas that emerged from the project are outlined here.

Our need for community

The faster that globalisation develops, the more people feel the need to connect with their local community. Linking people through the arts builds health, confidence and self-esteem. Arts activities can have significant positive impact on both individuals and communities and strengthen their engagement and resilience.

People often contribute to their community when they are provided with resources and infrastructure for connecting with each other. Providing physical places in which people can meet such as galleries, performance spaces or art centres is a key strategy in supporting community connectedness. Another strategy is developing partnerships with government, business and other organisations. Creating and supporting local, national or international cultural networks which share information and training is also an important tool for connecting people and communities.

Valuing diversity

With one quarter of Australians born overseas many regional areas are linguistically and culturally diverse. This creates potential benefits for production, innovation and creativity. Participation in multicultural arts activities leads to the promotion of trust and acceptance. The positive recognition and expression of diversity through a range of art forms is important in creating a cohesive society.

In 2014 the Australia Council for the Arts found that 92% of people surveyed agreed that Indigenous arts are an important part of Australian culture. Indigenous artists practicing traditional and contemporary art are supporting better understanding and reconciliation across the regions.

For example, BighART's *Namatjira* project beginning in 2009 showcased a variety of arts projects and community development initiatives that celebrated Albert Namatjira's life and legacy. The project boosted civic pride and community identity for the Namatjira family and Western Arrente communities in Central Australia. It included an internationally acclaimed theatre production play, a documentary film, workshops and a number of art exhibitions. With performances and exhibitions in Australia and London which received critical acclaim, the project reached a wide audience and provided the opportunity to raise awareness of social issues from within Western Arrente communities.

Feeling part of society

Problems such as unemployment or family breakdown are alleviated when people feel included in society. Social inclusion is a determinant of mental health and well-being. The arts play a vital role in reaching and engaging people. They provide social opportunities and entertainment alongside other activities such as sports or gaming.

Volunteering is a key activity that brings people together and creates social capital. Most arts organisations in regional areas rely on volunteers, and provide the opportunity for people to engage and connect. Volunteering builds networks, skills and professional experience and has positive effects on people's physical and mental vitality.

The value of civic pride

Civic pride in a community can improve social behaviour and encourage people to care for the neighbourhood and the environment. A community which prides itself can generate a feeling of well-being for residents, which in turn boosts internal and external perceptions of a region.

The arts provide many opportunities for individuals and groups to generate civic pride. Public celebrations and local festivals engage people and enable community self-determination. Festivals and arts events give regional communities an opportunity to communicate the vision and values of a place and help a regional community to form a strong and distinct shared identity.

Public art projects engage people. They often create a physical expression of local cultural values.

The value of local groups

Many regional arts activities and organisations are small, local and community-focussed. Local community choirs, small theatre or dance groups, a gallery society or a group of artists all serve the local community, creating a sense of community identity.

The critical importance of the role of these community associations involved in visual arts and crafts, music, theatre, dance and other arts is widely recognised by community development, health and academic institutions.

Touring arts activities

Other regional arts activities may be 'imported' through inter and intra State touring. Major performing arts companies play a critical role, as do other workshop experiences presented by professional artists. Such activities may attract visitors from beyond the immediate region and provide an economic flow-on effect. When Bendigo Art Gallery staged the *Grace Kelly Style Icon* exhibition, it attracted an audience of over 150,000 people in a town with a population of less than 100,000 people, and contributed over \$16M to the local economy.

Arts projects can re-define locations

Rural, regional and remote locations are unique, complex and a significant part of Australian identity, defined in part by history and landscape. Many are now adversely affected by shifts in local economies and populations. Arts activities and projects can re-define such locations in new and positive ways, providing both residents and visitors with a strong sense of a community's unique identity. The *First Coat* mural festival and project in Toowoomba has been credited with reducing vandalism from tagging and graffiti, changing the nature of the CBD, attracting tourists and bringing the region to national and international attention.

Increasing employment and regional incomes

In regional areas the arts provide a means of income for artists and art workers, and for owners and employees of local businesses and services. Investment in the arts provides opportunities for improvement to the local economy, generating arts-based employment, arts-based cultural tourism, event-based spending and construction of arts infrastructure.

Art play a role in regional development

Governments contribute to regional development by supporting employment and wealth-generating economic activities. Regional development funding for arts projects can revitalise a local area – a rural town, an urban precinct or an abandoned industrial site.

Developing, operating and maintaining physical infrastructure creates jobs. For example, when \$8.5M was invested in the Wangaratta Performing Arts Centre it created 130 jobs during construction and now employs about 38 locals in full and part time positions.

But not just buildings

Financial contributions to regional development may also support activities and projects which develop a creative economy – one in which culture and commerce converge. Regional areas with cultural infrastructure or creative clusters are attractive to people seeking to relocate from cities. Having a range of arts organisations and events is critical to attracting and retaining professionals to a region, including doctors, nurses or teachers

together with people employed in architecture, design, media and entertainment or local professional artists.

This group can contribute to a regional economy by developing creative industries, providing important services, providing employment in small and medium enterprises and, in addition, may provide on-going skills development and training. Schools, TAFEs and universities offering arts education support a regional area's ability to maintain such a creative population.

The value of festivals and events

Festivals have been identified as a key source of economic regeneration that leverage the cultural heritage of a region. Festivals and other regional arts events attract audiences, increase tourism, increase visits to other local attractions and provide a flow on effect for economic activity in local shops, restaurants, cafes and accommodation.

Arts programs or festivals that encourage visitors to stay longer provide greater opportunities to increase spending in regional areas.

Arts events attract visitors who may otherwise have limited awareness of the area. Arts events and venues such as galleries or performing arts centres contribute to a perception of a unique destination, thus increasing the attraction of places. Places with cultural attractions and creative industries can attract particular demographic groups with disposable income, either as visitors or new residents.

Why we should support regional artist activities

Beyond the experience of the artistic product or performance, the arts provide spaces and avenues for people and communities to access creative experiences, and provide opportunities for networking and self-expression. Providing access to a range of social events, festivals, exhibitions, theatrical productions and music concerts supports the creativity and morale of a local community.

Arts activities in regional areas provide a catalyst that benefits the community by bringing people together. The development of artistic and cultural talent in conjunction with community ownership of grass roots cultural projects aids sustainable change, promotes consistent and coherent regional identity and strengthens the local economy.