

**Comparing Australian and Canadian public library systems: A qualitative investigation of  
older adult public library programming and services**

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## **Introduction**

With declining fertility rates and the aging of the baby boomer generation, both Canada and Australia are experiencing a demographic shift.<sup>1,2</sup> Their aging populations place new demands and provide new opportunities for public libraries. This research investigates how Canadian and Australian public libraries use programming and services to respond to these new demands and opportunities. Using an environmental scan of existing public library programs and a thematic analysis of interviews with public library staff members interested in this field, we sought to identify and compare common practices and lessons learned within Canada and Australia. This research offers public libraries insights into how they can advance their older adult programming and services.

## **Background and Rationale**

This section outlines the role public libraries can play in supporting the wellbeing of communities and their individual members who are experiencing the opportunities and challenges associated with aging. A description of how public libraries support communities and individuals provides a context for understanding the value of this research for Australian and Canadian communities.

### **How do public libraries support older adults?**

By disseminating knowledge and resources, and by providing opportunities for social connection, public libraries may be primed to address the social and informational needs of older adults. Later life can bring new challenges and opportunities for individuals, such as adjusting to and enjoying retirement and declining mobility and physical health. Public libraries are community hubs mandated to serve all members.<sup>3,4</sup> Within these hubs, older adults can participate in library programming that offers opportunities for leisure, learning, and social connection.<sup>3-5</sup> Programming takes the forms of courses, activities, events, ad hoc customer services interactions, and organized social groups. These institutions have been depicted as vehicles for life-long learning that foster digital, financial, language, and health literacy.<sup>6-10</sup>

Digital literacy training is particularly important in fostering digital citizenship among older adults.<sup>11</sup> Digital citizenship is “the ability to participate” in societies where internet access and the use of information technology are necessary when it comes to accessing political, social, and economic opportunities.<sup>12(p.1)</sup> Those above the age of 65 were deemed to be the least digitally included demographic group in the 2016 Australian Digital Inclusion Index.<sup>13</sup> A key

way that public libraries support the wellbeing of older adults and their communities is by empowering older adults with the knowledge and skills to partake in online activity.

### **How do public libraries support aging communities?**

In addition to addressing the social and informational needs of individuals, public libraries can also play a central role in supporting the democratic principles and economic wellbeing of local communities.<sup>14</sup> Population aging is generally portrayed as a threat to sustainable healthcare and labour markets within academic, grey, and popular literature.<sup>15</sup> Public libraries are well-positioned to mitigate these perceived threats as they can be leveraged to create a culture that is more inclusive of older adults, bridge social divisions, and encourage positive population health outcomes.<sup>9,16-18</sup> Likewise, public libraries can serve as platforms for older adults to volunteer and share their unique skill sets and knowledge with younger generations.<sup>3,19</sup>

Public libraries have been deemed one of the last public spaces not characterized by privatization in Western countries.<sup>20</sup> This allows them to offer financially accessible spaces for vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups, such as some older adults, minority groups, and individuals experiencing homelessness, unemployment, or mental illness.<sup>21</sup> As public libraries offer spaces well suited for social interactions and the sharing of ideas between diverse groups of people, they can also foster social capital.<sup>21-23</sup> Social capital refers to the value derived from one's social networks.<sup>24</sup> Its two basic components are trust, the expectation that one can work with others without betrayal, and reciprocity, the expectation that one's good deeds will be repaid eventually.<sup>24-26</sup> By bringing diverse groups of people together, public libraries can reinforce community cohesion and increase social capital.<sup>19,24</sup>

This social cohesion and social capital may be particularly important when it comes to promoting social equality.<sup>17-18</sup> Public libraries may thus have the potential to counter age-related inequalities. Likewise, they have been described in research as “platforms or modes for connecting, directing, and redistributing diverse skill sets and knowledge.”<sup>27(p.2948)</sup> As public libraries have continued to reimagine themselves in concordance with technological advancements, they have become the loci of new types of social networks that can enhance public dialogues and facilitate cultural development.<sup>27,28</sup>

### **What challenges do public libraries face within the field of older adult programming?**

Public libraries have and are in the process of adapting to rapid technological advancement and shifting demographics. These societal shifts alter the way that information is consumed, how library services are offered, and the nature of employment within the library.<sup>8</sup> Due to the increasing diversity among older adults and the size of this demographic, public libraries need to both increase and/or invent new programs.<sup>6</sup> They often do this with limited and precarious funding.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, there may be a lag between what libraries have become as they have adapted to new ways of consuming information and how they are understood by the social institutions that fund them.<sup>27,28</sup> This structural lag may lead funding bodies to misunderstand public libraries as locations that merely lend books and thus to question their relevancy in societies shaped by digital and smart technologies.<sup>27,28</sup> While seeking to mitigate challenges and facilitate opportunities associated with having an aging population, many continue to work within physical spaces and funding arrangements that are rooted in outdated understandings of the ‘public library’.

## **Why compare Australian and Canadian public library older adult services and programs?**

Public libraries are modifying services, programs, and spaces in step with societal shifts, such as population aging, increasing cultural diversity, and rapid technological advancements. These societal shifts are experienced in public libraries globally.<sup>6</sup> The global nature of these phenomena thus present public libraries located internationally with an opportunity to learn from one another. Canada and Australia resemble each other in regards to their cultural histories of colonialism, democratic political systems, free-market economies, immigration policies, and the size and nature of their populations, which are spread across large geographic areas. Challenges facing public libraries in Australia and Canada are similar.

This study investigated how the public library's response to these challenges differ within Australia and Canada and what could be learned from these differences. Due to similarities in population size and dispersion, economic systems, and cultural history, lessons learned in Australia may be applicable in Canada, and vice versa. This project responded to the following research questions;

1. What programs do Australian public libraries provide for older adults?
2. How are these programs developed, funded, sustained, and evaluated?
3. What challenges do Australian public library staff members face when offering programs to older adults?
4. How does older adult library programming in Canada and Australia differ? What can be learned from these differences?

The purpose of this report is thus to share knowledge of these lessons learned in order to support innovation within the field of older adult public library programming.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Design**

Our study design is composed of three stages; an environmental scan of existing library programs that older adults may attend; a thematic analysis of interviews with 9 library staff members who are interested in the field of older adult library programming; and a comparison of Canadian and Australian project data. An environmental scan is a qualitative research method that involves identifying the needs of an organization or institution, systematically gathering information, analyzing this information, and then communicating and leveraging the results to support decision making.<sup>29-30</sup> This environmental scan drew on library websites and promotional materials to generate an awareness to what is already being done by public libraries in regards to older adult library programming. It covered the public library systems within Australia's five largest cities; Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney. This scan served a double purpose:

1. To generate a contextualized understanding of the Australian landscape of older adult public library programming.
2. To provide insight into how the practices and barriers to program development, identified within the thematic analysis, are manifested within the public eye.

While the scan was used to respond to our first research question regarding the programming offered to older adults, the thematic analysis provided an insider's perspective on program

development, funding, and evaluation strategies and the challenges that public library staff face (questions 2 and 3). Thematic analysis is a foundational research method used to identify and better understand patterns within qualitative data.<sup>31</sup>

The data gathered in Australia was then compared with Canadian data similar in nature. This comparison was conducted in response to question 4; “How does older adult library programming in Canada and Australia differ? What can be learned from these differences?” The Canadian portion of this research was conducted between August and December, 2018. The same interview guide and analysis methods were used in both Canada and Australia. Likewise, the same researcher analyzed both data sets. The interviews in both countries ranged from 30 to 70 minutes. Within Canada, the principle investigator interviewed 18 public library staff members (Western Canada- 3, Central Canada – 13, Eastern Canada – 2) and conducted an environmental scan of the 40 members of the Canadian Urban Library Council (CULC) that offer older adult programs.

### **Data Collection and Analysis:**

The Australian environmental scan was conducted in September 2019 and thus provides a point-in-time perspective on what programs are being offered for older adults in the five included library systems. All library programs where an older adult would be welcome were included in the scan (intergenerational programs, programs where no age requirement is given, adult programs, and older adult specific programming).

The thematic analysis entailed interviews with public library staff who identified as being involved or interested in the field of older adult library programming. We used snowball sampling, where researchers seek out referrals of potential participants who can speak to the research questions.<sup>32</sup> This sampling method was used to compensate for the principle investigator’s limited familiarity and experience within Australian public library systems. The principle investigator relied on individuals with in-depth knowledge of Australian library systems to suggest specific public library staff members who may be interested in older adult library programming or, more broadly, library systems known for this type of programming. All participants held community engagement and programming responsibilities within their places of employment. Their titles included head librarian, community coordinator, community learning coordinator, community engagement coordinator, manager of programs and services, and manager of customer experience. All library systems implicated within the Canadian and Australian environmental scans and the thematic analyses were funded by local councils or municipal governments, with the exception of library systems in New Brunswick, Canada (funded by the province) and Tasmania (funded by the state). The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

We conducted six interviews with staff members of public library systems in Metropolitan Melbourne, Victoria. Metropolitan Melbourne is a geographic area that represents 31 local governments, each with its own library system, and which is known for its cultural diversity.<sup>33</sup> To provide additional insight into the national state of older adult library programming and services, we conducted additional interviews in Western Australia, Queensland, Tasmania, and South Australia. The interviews that occurred within Metropolitan Melbourne were conducted in-person at or near the public library in which the participant worked. Interviews that took place outside of Metropolitan Melbourne were conducted over the phone, with the exception of an interview in a

public library in Queensland. These interviews all occurred between September and November 2019.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed with the thematic analysis methods outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). The research team first became familiarized with the data by generating initial codes to organize segments of the interviews into categories. Initial codes are descriptive labels that relate to the research questions.<sup>31</sup> The research team then looked for themes among these codes. A theme can be understood as “something important about the data in relation to the research questions, and that represents some level of patterned response or meaning.”<sup>31(p. 82)</sup> The themes generated from the 9 interviews with public library staff members in Australia were then juxtaposed with observations from the environmental scans and the findings from the Canadian data.

## Limitations

The findings and discussion presented here should be read with the backdrop of this study’s limitations. Due to time constraints, the environmental scan and the thematic analysis conducted in Australia were smaller in scale than that in Canada. The Australian and Canadian data are thus not exact equivalents. Table 1 illustrates this limitation.

Table 1: Number of participants in Australia and Canada

	<b>Canada</b>	<b>Australia</b>
Number of Library Systems Involved in the Environmental Scans	40	5
Number of Interview Participants	18	9

Furthermore, the differences and similarities presented in our discussion represent similarities and differences in what was emphasized in the interviews. Thus, Canadian library staff members may employ practices and experience challenges that they did not emphasize but were emphasized by their Australian counterparts and vice versa. Likewise, practices in one country would not negate the value of practices in the other. This comparison can thus be understood as a sharing of ideas and experiences between library staff members interested in the field of older adult programming but working within different countries.

Sampling methods and the small sample size used in both Australian and Canadian portions of this project render the findings ungeneralizable. The participants within the thematic analyses and the environmental scan were from large urban library systems. This report thus does not capture the best practices and challenges that smaller rural library systems may experience. Likewise, all participants in Canada and Australia were library staff members who expressed an interest in the field of older adult programming or who were suggested to the researcher to be someone who either is from a library system known for their adult programming or is interested in this field. Rather than showcasing a representative sample of older adult programming in Australia and Canada, this project provides insight into the common

practices and program challenges experienced by those who are likely to be trailblazers when it comes to offering programs and services for older adults.

The thematic analysis findings should be seen as representing only the perspectives and experiences of the participating public library staff members. This denotes another key limitation to consider. The research presented here does not showcase the perspectives and experiences of older adults. Their perspectives and accounts of their experiences are needed to confirm the validity of the practices and challenges identified within this report.

## Comparison Findings

This section recounts observations from the comparison of Australian and Canadian data. We used the environmental scans to compare programs and services. The thematic analysis resulted in a comparison of practices related to program development, evaluation, and community partnerships, in addition to the challenges that public libraries commonly face when serving older adults.

### Similarities:

*Programs and services;* The participating Canadian and Australian libraries represented within the environmental scan offered similar programs and services for older adults. Both Canadian and Australian library systems are engaged in outreach and in-house programming and services. Outreach programs and services primarily consisted of delivering books and resources to house-bound customers and offering activities within long-term care residences. Programs offered in all Canadian and Australian libraries included book clubs, writing groups, computer training, English as a Second Language resources and learning opportunities, knitting circles, author readings, informational sessions, and movie showings. Common programs also included paint or craft afternoons, audio or podcast clubs, repair cafes (participants learn how to fix small appliances), legal clinic consultations, virtual reality (VR) experiences, and yoga, meditation, or fitness classes.

Common topics for informational sessions and workshops were related to health and wellbeing, legal/government services, finances, genealogy, indigenous culture, local history, and hobbies. The majority of informational sessions related to health and wellbeing were offered in partnership with an external organization, such as a branch of the municipal government, university, and non-profit organizations. Workshops and courses were commonly related to digital literacy, health and well-being, and skill development.

Although not emphasized within the environmental scan, both Canadian and Australian interview participants indicated that intergenerational programming has been successful in the past and is a type of program that they hoped to do more of in the future. Intergenerational programs generated interactions between different age groups. An example of this type of program in Canada would be a repair café, where older adults teach younger age groups how to fix small appliances. An example in Australia would be a story time, where older adults from a long term care residence would visit the library to read and sing with pre-school age children.

We have a local nursing home that comes down here and they're really competent and they're not bedridden people at all. And they come at story time and this one lady plays a guitar and so they all get up there and clap and then she plays the guitar and the kids all respond to that (Victoria).

We've heard feedback from seniors saying that they wanted more intergenerational programming, not necessarily with their own families, but just to have a chance to talk to younger people and share their stories with them (Ontario).



These programs were seen as a way of engaging older adults in a manner that they find meaningful, facilitating intergenerational understanding, and showcasing the skill sets, capacities, and knowledge of older adults.

*Facilitating opportunities and intervening in age-related challenges:* A key role of public libraries, as depicted by participants, is facilitating opportunities and intervening in the issues facing communities. This was evident when a participant described how their library supported community members in dealing with the aftermath of major natural disaster:

The library was impacted and it changed us. So all the things we had planned for early on in the year, we had to very quickly put on hold or find the priorities and then we had to go out and do relief out in the town. So we have disaster centers where people were displaced to, and so we went out and did lots of programs and things like that out there. And there were small business centers set up really quickly as well. So we had to activate our space as well to make sure we could help people who needed grants and funding and all sorts of things to get their small businesses back together again. Then there's lots of people who just weren't living in their homes anymore and needed a computer (Queensland).

Our thematic analyses drew attention to how public libraries aim to intervene in old age-related challenges. Social isolation among older adults represented a key age-related issue discussed by all participants in both Canada and Australia. Participants depicted social isolation as both a driving force motivating older adults to use the library or a reason why the library offers programs tailored for this demographic. When asked about where they saw their library going next in the future with regards to older adult programming, a participant noted that “social isolation is a real killer. There's some real horror stories out there and yeah. I think that's an area where we'll definitely be looking at” (Victoria). In line with a commitment to mitigate the issue of social isolation among older adults by creating opportunities for social connection, one Australian participant emphasized how the library is an important arena for creating mutual understandings and respect among diverse groups of people.

I think that public libraries have a real place around creating social harmony. And I think probably in Canada, it's a similar kind of space in that diversity of cultural experience and generational gaps that's kind of an ongoing and increasingly emerging issue... Libraries have this ability to get that melting pot of people and they all come in. And in general, there is a level of respect in these spaces that you may not get at the local shopping center or out in the park or whatever (Victoria).

Other age-related challenges that public libraries seek to intervene in include homelessness (especially among older women) and a lack of digital literacy which encumbers the ability of older adults to access community and government services.

Public library staff also sought to facilitate opportunities for older adults. Within both Canadian and Australian thematic analyses, older adults were depicted as active users of the library, engaged in borrowing resources, volunteering, using their libraries' spaces for reading, research, and meeting friends, and participating in programming and one-off informational sessions. This high use of the library was attributed to having more time during retirement years. All participants viewed retirement as a key condition that can enable and/or prompt older adults to take advantage of their local public library's spaces, resources, and programs. A Canadian participant explained the relationship between retirement and the library when stating, “with older adults, you might be learning in retirement, so you might be looking at learning about something that you never had time for when you were younger” (Ontario). Creating volunteer

positions exemplified a way in which public libraries facilitate opportunities associated with retirement and later life. Although both Canadian and Australian public libraries noted that they create volunteer opportunities for older adults, the theme of volunteering was more evident in the Australian portion of this project. Participants hypothesized that older adults seek out volunteer opportunities as a result of having more time in retirement, still being physically healthy, and having a desire to contribute meaningfully in one's community: "With people living longer and possibly retiring between 60 and 70, they still are fit and able to, and they are looking for things to do to give back to their community" (Victoria). Example volunteer positions listed by participants included teaching Spanish, sorting seeds for a seed library, greeting guests and giving directions within the library, and delivering books and resources to house-bound individuals.

The notion that older adults are heavily involved in volunteering was epitomized by participants who stated that "99% of our volunteers are older adults" (South Australia) and "a good proportion of our library volunteers who want to come and contribute to society and do good things are in the senior years" (Victoria). When creating volunteering opportunities, there was a clear desire to make these positions meaningful; "It's finding opportunities, sort of stimulating volunteer work rather than just very tactile sort of thing, like shelving" (Western Australia). One Australian interviewee noted that their library has a "skills data-base" with the contact information of individuals who have indicated an interest in volunteering and they match these volunteers with a programming or service task within the library (not a task encompassed in the job descriptions of paid employees). Another library staff member indicated that they identify a volunteer need and then create a volunteer position advertisement. Creating meaningful volunteer opportunities for older adults was a key example of how public libraries seek to facilitate opportunities associated with later life and intervene in age-related challenges.

*Partnerships:* All participating library staff members in Canada and Australia identified building collaborative relationships with government bodies, non-profit organizations, and other library systems as a best practice. Developing beneficial partnerships required both regular communication and for there to be a mutual benefit for both parties. This was captured when a participant noted;

It's very much you have to have some face to face time. Regular communication. Kate from [name of community partner], if she left, I don't know what we'd do as well though. So there's the potential issue there. I think it's just a regular communication and making sure that everything's been made. Like it's not all us getting from them and them not getting anything (Victoria).

Within the Canadian and Australian interviews, it became apparent that these collaborative partnerships served three dominant purposes;

1. To determine how best to program and design services for an older adult audience; When asked about how their library system develops programs, a participant stated, "So really it's sort of the big, the not-for profit committees. We talk with them. We liaise with them to find out where the need might be in relation to anything a library might be offering" (Tasmania).
2. To increase programming without increasing the library's programming budget: "And I mean usually the question I ask, is there another organization in the city or in the community that is already serving these needs? I mean, can we work together with

- this group? Or are we trying to duplicate, trying to reproduce something that already exists, because that wouldn't be a good use of our funds" (Ontario).
3. To leverage expertise, skills, and knowledge of community partners for program content; "You mentioned dementia friendly programing and I think we realize that it is a need for us. In order to fulfill the need, we would probably need to partner with an organization to develop dementia friendly programs" (Ontario).

Partnering with organizations external to the library thus served as a means of bolstering the library's capacity to meet the needs of older adults.

*Program development:* Canadian and Australian participants described similar processes when it came to developing programs for older adults. One of these processes entails direct engagement with older adults. Deciphering the perspectives, experiences, and interests of older adults via direct engagement with this demographic and the community organizations that serve them was intrinsic to the process of identifying their programming needs and wants. This engagement primarily took the form of informal conversations and program evaluation forms. To make their services more known within their older adult community who didn't see themselves as traditional library users, a Canadian library staff member also created a community event.

We discovered that almost 50% of our community were older adults. We weren't meeting their needs. Then we came up with plans on how we can bring more people to the library that don't read. We're more like a community center at this point...So I work closely with the social worker at the clinic. It was she that suggested that we do the wellness fair. It was called the Winter Fair, and we had a lot of exhibitions and things that people could see. It just was a spinoff from that, and then we did surveys and asked people what they were interested in, what would bring them to the library and went from there (New Brunswick).

The value of conducting surveys was indicated when an Australian participant noted;

We survey users and non-users. So you want to understand what your users want and what they want in the future from you. You want to find out what works really well and what's not working. But also you want to know why people aren't using you in the town. Like, what is it that we're missing (Queensland).

Informal conversations also represented an important means of deciphering which programs should be continued or amended;

We've had an author at this branch and at one of our other branches and when people are waiting in the signing line, I'll just sort of chat and wonder around and just sort of over-hear, but also talk to people directly and ask them how they found it. And having that informal feedback is really, really valuable (Victoria).

These informal conversations, observations, and program evaluations were instruments for generating programming ideas and an awareness of the elements of a programs that make it a 'success' among an older adult audience. For example, participants in Canada and Australia noted that older adults often appreciate light refreshments at programs and programs should take place during the day and not on a weekend.

In addition to leveraging the expertise and knowledge of community partners and direct engagement with older adults, participants also noted the importance of paying attention to both

the places, resources, and organizations surrounding the library and what is happening in the community more broadly.

But if you found a way to cater to what's going on in terms of pop culture and interest throughout the calendar of the community and bigger things that are going on, you could create events within bigger umbrella stuff. You'd get cross promotion, cross marketing, cross interest and you target to that particular thing (Victoria).

This same library staff member indicated that their library developed an acute sense of the spaces, resources, and organizations surrounding the library via a systematic community mapping project.

I had a student come in and she did community mapping for us. And it's from the space, which I think is so hilarious because library schools don't teach this stuff, but it's from a space of community development sociology and community engagement. And so she actually mapped the community. So whatever was within a seven to 10-minute walk, had a certain color and she actually created like a Google maps with the pins and everything. Like where was the nearest police station? Where was the nearest like social services offices like your neighborhood has is all that kind of stuff (Victoria).

Developing an awareness of what is of interest to the community and the resources and organizations that support it are practices that underlie program development efforts.

Another significant theme drawn from both the Canadian and Australian analyses would be that programs are developed and refined iteratively by trial and error. In Canada, a participant used the metaphor of “throwing spaghetti at the wall” to describe this process (Ontario). Two participants from Australia noted that they like to view programs as “pilots” (Victoria). Another Australian participant described program development as experimentation; “I like the idea of trying something and seeing if it works and then working with community to make it what they want” (Queensland). Trial and error was thus intrinsic to the process of converting insights gathered through engagement with older adults, community partners, and an understanding of the resources and events that shape a community into refined and meaningful programs.

*Welcoming and accessible community spaces:* Canadian and Australian library staff recognize that dominant social institutions and culture may privilege some over others. Consequently, library staff indicated that they were committed to reflexively identifying these areas and providing services, spaces, and programs that are both accessible for everyone and that can mitigate social inequalities. This ethos is encapsulated in a participant's statement about how staff training has influenced their programming and services.

If you go around the corner, you'll see we've got an indigenous flag on the window. And in the children's area, we've got a rainbow flag on the window. Like we're just learning about creating a sense of safety for people from minority groups and also how to improve on working with people that have disabilities. I think we're making progress. Like we've for example, we're currently working on our reconciliation action plan with the council, but I think we have a long road to go in that because I think we tend to think of libraries as a safe place. That's because it's born from our culture and our familiarity. But to other groups outside of the mainstream, it's not necessarily considered a safe place. It actually looks fairly corporate and there's a lot of groups that are not that comfortable with a corporate look (Victoria).

Reconciliation action plans (RAPs) are policy frameworks, developed in partnership with indigenous peoples, that seek to advance reconciliation. Many public and private organizations in Australia have developed RAPs for their specific institution, including the University of Melbourne. A Canadian library participant explained that their library systems removed check-out desks in order to make the library a more welcoming space for the community; “those desks were a big barrier, I think for children, for people with disabilities, for people who are intimidated by authority” (Ontario). Removing checkout desks and considering how to make a space more welcoming using visuals (such as a flag) thus represent small steps towards fostering library spaces characterized by inclusivity and social equality.

Digital literacy programs were viewed as a key way of fostering equality among different age groups. These programs are a response to the possibility that older adults, who have had less immersion within a digital culture throughout their lifetime than younger generations, may be at a disadvantage when it comes to participating in their community and benefiting from community resources. A participant asserted that “I sincerely believe that if you don't have a level of digital literacy, you can't participate fully in 21st century” (Ontario). An Australian participant explained their emphasis on digital literacy by noting, “we see a serious divide for 50 and over people who haven't yet come into the digital world” (Tasmania). Participants in Metropolitan Melbourne noted that these programs were heavily subsidized by government bodies. Government websites instruct individuals having trouble using their online services to contact their local library. The catalyst for this support was the move from in-person services to strictly online services.

Library staff also indicated that they consider the barriers that may prevent older adults from taking advantage of these ‘accessible’ community and library services. One participant pointed out that they had to be more creative with their marketing services to ensure that their marketing reached populations who are unable to both get to the physical library and access the internet.

Like in some respite services, we would need to go there to talk to the support workers to ask, what kinds of things do we want to engage in? We let them know and for people with significant disability because it is there library as well. And they're not, they don't look on the internet. So how do they know? (Tasmania).

By reflexively seeking to identify social inequalities and areas where the library may be inaccessible, participants illustrated how public libraries can break down social and cultural barriers that may marginalize some older adults.

*Overcoming limited budgets, spaces, and staff capacity:* Geographic locations within communities, limited spaces within buildings suitable for programming, poor public transit and parking options, and budget and human resource constraints can encumber the ability of public library staff to develop programs and services for older adults.

We have staffing capacity issues; we also have financial budget concerns. And I guess the other real challenge is competition with other services within the library. For instance, you know it is all very important to serve the needs of younger adults, younger adults will also need the meeting rooms space as well, there are always a competition for meeting rooms, so that is a real challenge (Ontario).

The challenge of space was also illustrated when a participant stated; “they were built at times when they were basically book depositories and they are so much more now. So we are finding

that those traditional buildings are just not cutting it” (Western Australia). As public libraries have evolved in concordance with their technological, social, and cultural contexts, many of the participating library staff indicated that their resources have remained more stagnant.

Interviewees depicted various strategies for managing these challenges; A library staff member in Metropolitan Melbourne noted that finances are “are a challenge all libraries face and you work around it. So just means that when you do have to pay for an external speaker, you make sure that, that person or that program is really worthwhile” (Victoria). With a similar sentiment, a participant in Ontario stated that “sometimes if we see we haven’t addressed something adequately in our budget or we’re not able to, we look for funding elsewhere” (Ontario). This often took the form of grants. To ensure effective use of resources, one Australian participant described how each branch in their library system had a particular programming focus. Likewise, all participants indicated that they shared resources to do more with limited budgets and staff capacity.

Both Canadian and Australian library staff had few strategies to overcome issues of space. They indicated that this was an issue that was largely out of their hands. This was captured when a participant stated; “One branch is in a neighborhood that has a very large senior population, but this library branch doesn’t have any programming space. Unfortunately, it’s really difficult to offer programming there. We are crossing our fingers for a new library” (British Columbia). An issue discussed predominantly within Australia was also the tension around creating quiet study spaces while also offering programs that generate conversation and activity. To mitigate this challenge, an Australian participant used a sign by the entrance of the library that listed programming (noise generating events) happening at the library.

I got one of those sandwich board chalkboard things that goes right when you walk into the little atrium of my library. It’s right there and it says what’s on that day. And partly just to go like, not because we’re trying to get people to go to these things. It’s more to go “story time equals noise” so from this time there’s going to be noise. So it helps kind of establish the sort of the way that the space is going to be used on any given day and what that could actually mean to somebody when they see that (Victoria).

Another participant noted that they managed spacing issues by re-organizing their space; I think that it’s possible to rearrange things so that you have buffer zones in a quieter area” (Tasmania). By creatively working with spaces, setting expectations about noise level, sharing resources with other library systems, and applying for grants, participants sought to maximize their resources.

## **Differences**

*Programs and services:* Although the environmental scans demonstrated clear similarities with regards to programming and services for older adults in Canada and Australia, a key difference would be that many Canadian public libraries have a webpage dedicated to the older adult demographic and label programs specifically for older adults. In contrast, all five library systems in Australia did not have a specific programming category for older adults on their websites. Likewise, few programs were specified as being for older adults. Exceptions to this trend would be two programs sponsored by State governments and Telstra, a large telecommunication corporation in Australia. Likewise, informational sessions for older adults, such as those on legal rights and financial planning in later life, were delivered by non-profit organizations whose primary beneficiaries are older adults. These organizations would include

Seniors' Rights Victoria and the Seniors' Rights and Advocacy Service from Legal Aid Western Australia. Rather than specifying a specific age category, one library system advertised programs as being "suitable for seniors".

Likewise, Canadian and Australian libraries differed in regards to programs and services for people with dementia and their caregivers. The five Australian libraries included in the environmental scan did not offer this type of programming. However, Australian participants indicated that they have offered informational sessions about dementia, informational sessions on brain health, programming designed to elicit memories (reminiscence kits), and social hours for caregivers in the past. Likewise, Australian interviewees indicated that they collaborated with Dementia Australia. In Canada, programs offered for older adults experiencing dementia primarily included one-time informational sessions. All informational sessions were offered in partnership with a branch of the Alzheimer's Society. One exception to this trend would be the Toronto Public Library's, "Dementia and Memory" informational session, which was offered in partnership with the Geriatric Mental Health Research Service at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. These programs were primarily designed for caregivers of individuals with dementia. Two exceptions to this trend would include the program "Dementia Friends", which aims to educate community members on how to best support and interact with those experiencing dementia. Another exception would include "Brain Waves Café" at the Oshawa Public Library. This program, offered by the Alzheimer's Society of Durham Region, provides both those directly impacted by the disease and their caregivers with a space and activities designed to foster social support among attendees.

*Labelling programs:* While all participants upheld that considering the unique needs of older adults in programming is important, they differed on the best approach to labelling the programs that target these needs. The environmental scan in Canada revealed that 23 of the 40 library systems offered programs that were specifically labelled for an older adult audience. While some Canadian interviewees articulated that they avoided labelling programs for older adults to prevent deterring potential program participants who did not see themselves as 'older', others indicated that they labelled programs as for older adults to intentionally honour the uniqueness of later life and to create a designated space for them. Australian participants appeared more on the same page. Seven of the eight participants asserted that their library chose not to label or "identify particular groups of people strategically" (Tasmania). Programs were only labelled as for older adults during "Senior's Month/Week", which occurs annually in each of the states.

Reasons given for not labelling programs in Australia were centered around creating welcoming spaces for all age groups and not deterring individuals who could benefit from a particular program. One library staff member illustrated this reasoning with a story of a library user with dementia who benefited from attending an early literacy story time:

We're not going to tell the 85-year-old lady who comes with her 50 something-year-old daughter that she's not allowed to be there. She comes because she's experiencing dementia, it's actually a really wonderful space for her and she enjoys it because it's actually all the rhymes and stuff that she had as a kid (Victoria).

Another benefit of not labelling programs for older adults (although expecting an older adult audience due to the program content and time of day it is offered) would be that it creates an

opportunity for intergenerational social connection. This was captured in a story told by another participant about how a group of older adults mentored a younger adult:

I love it when a younger person comes along and sometimes they mentor, like for example, the gardening group, they were mentoring a young lady who was kind of not sure what she wanted to do and then she wound up enrolling herself in a gardening, like a horticultural course. So not here at the library, at an institution. So she's left the group now. But it was partly that support that she got that gave her confidence to realize it was something she wanted to do. So there's lots of lovely interactions like that (Victoria).

There was thus a tension around labelling programs that target an older adult audience within the Canadian portion of this research that was less evident within the Australian portion.

*Relationship with council/ municipal government:* Another key difference between findings in Australia and Canada would be their relationship with their council or state government. While Canadian public library staff members appeared to view their local governments as key community partners in which they worked closely, the Australian interviewees depicted a more intimate relationship. This was clearly denoted when a participant stated “we are the council” (Victoria). Although both Canadian and Australian participants received their funding from government bodies, the Australian participants depicted themselves as being embedded within their councils.

The intimate relationship between the libraries and councils in Australia assisted with program development and implementation, where libraries leveraged the internal expertise of their councils. When asked how their library system goes about finding community partners to offer programs, an interviewee stressed how “starting internally” can ease the process; “it's very easy to get sucked into just what's going on in your physical branch. But if you can be as connected to council and others in your intergovernmental departments as possible, it's kind of makes things much easier” (Victoria). This intimate relationship likewise put libraries in a good position to reduce redundancy with regards to programs and services offered within their regions. This was conveyed when an interviewee stated,

We're constantly chatting to different departments about all sorts of different things; Just making sure that we're not double handling work. We're not doing the same work that another department has already done. Like that's crazy business. None of us have time for that (Queensland).

As they were in close collaboration with a variety of different branches of the local government, they had an acute awareness of what was being offered for older adults. Library staff members described not offering services for older adults experiencing dementia because this market was saturated in their community. An interviewee also emphasized that they did not offer programs for this population because their particular branch shared a building with the local governments' aged care services, who were more equipped than the library to offer this type of programming. The implications of having an intimate relationship with council/municipal government were thus less emphasized by Canadian public library participants.



## Discussion

### Public Libraries as Community Development Agents in the Midst of Technological Advancement and Population Aging

Findings here illustrate how public library programming and services utilized by older adults are intrinsic to a broader community building agenda. Community development agendas are about equipping community members with the skills, knowledge, and platforms needed to have an influence within their community.<sup>34-35</sup> Community development, social exclusion, and social inclusion are interdependent concepts; A community where people are marginalized is a community that is underdeveloped.<sup>36</sup> Common practices depicted in our findings include creating a welcoming and accessible space for older adults, fostering social harmony among diverse groups of people, and addressing the digital divide between older and younger generations. These findings are indicative of a commitment to fostering social inclusion and thus to developing more robust communities. When investigating the implications of increasing digitalization on public spaces, McQuire (2016) begs the question, “How can ‘community’ be constituted and sustained when older forces of unification, such as shared cultural and religious experience, and especially a common language, are attenuated, disrupted, or absent?”<sup>37(p.28)</sup> This question captures what public libraries are grappling with as they adapt to rapid technological advancements and demographic shifts. Creating a sense of respect and belonging among a group of people of varying ages, languages, religions, cultures, personal histories, and socioeconomic backgrounds is a task at the heart of what public library staff members do on an everyday basis.

Likewise, the findings illustrate a desire among public libraries in Canada and Australia to make their library spaces socially and physically accessible and to know the resources, strengths, issues, and happenings of their communities. Their concern for creating accessible and welcoming spaces was characterized by a reflexive consideration of power relations that have been solidified within libraries over time (ex. libraries as having a corporate feel). This practice of creating welcoming and accessible spaces and knowing one’s community was depicted as a continual work-in-progress. Descriptions of this continual learning process of knowing one’s community align well with Foronda, Baptiste, Reinholt, and Ousman (2015)’s description of cultural humility.<sup>38</sup> They define cultural humility as “a process of openness, self-awareness, being egoless, and incorporating self-reflection and critique after willingly interacting with diverse individuals.”<sup>38(p. 213)</sup> This process is characterized by a commitment to continually learning about others and a willingness to identify and address power-imbalances.<sup>38</sup> When problematizing the rhetoric that libraries are ‘safe places’, Derr (2018) points out that “each day library staff come into their work places bringing with them their stories, their experiences, and an infinite combination of possible events.”<sup>39(4)</sup> The social contexts, particular identities, and personal histories of library staff have an influence on how they interact and foster a sense of inclusivity within their libraries. A willingness to identify and address biases and potential power-imbalances thus colours public library work. The concept of cultural humility may be useful for public library staff as they perpetually nurture welcoming and accessible spaces for older adults.

The majority of the practices and challenges described by participants in relation to serving older adults are not novel or surprising. For example, the Public Library Services and State Library of NSW published *Active, Engaged, Valued: Older People and NSW Public Libraries* in 2006.<sup>40</sup> This paper outlines best practices, strategic community partners, and the

need to consider older adults when providing services and programs. The content of this paper resembles closing findings of this research. Based on NSW's 2006 standards and recommendations, the participating libraries are doing well when it comes to serving older adults. The similarities between standards and recommendations given over a decade ago and how both Canadian and Australian libraries serve older adults today may signify that the practices and programs identified in this report have become orthodox. Having an 'orthodoxy' of practices for serving older adults begs the question of whether there is need for innovation within the field of older adult programming, or at least innovation within these common practices. This is a question best answered by older adults.

Direct engagement with older adults (both users and non-users) and the community institutions and organizations that serve them via informal conversations, community partnerships, and surveys was depicted in our findings and in literature as an important aspect of program development. This practice of developing programs and services in partnership with the target audience is commonly referred to as collaborative or co-design.<sup>41</sup> Engaging older adults and the community institutions and organizations that serve them in program development and evaluation is a practice central to community engagement, which is entailed in community development. Although there is a lack of consensus when it comes to defining community engagement, it can broadly be understood as the approaches used by public services to elicit the perspectives, experiences, and ideas of a community.<sup>42-43</sup> One participant noted that degree programs for librarianship do not adequately prepare library staff today when it comes to community engagement. Just as there has been a lag between how libraries have changed over time and how they are understood by the organizations that provide their funding, there may be a lag in regards to adapting core educational content to fit the nature of contemporary public library work.<sup>27,44</sup> Community development and engagement thus appeared to be something that the participating library staff members learned 'on the job' or by experience. Early career or student librarians may benefit from formal community development training.<sup>43,45</sup> This potential lag between librarian education and the nature of contemporary public library work is a by-product of the transition public libraries have undergone over the past decade as they have adapted to advancing digital technology.<sup>27,28</sup>

### **Libraries as Political Instruments**

In addition to being agents of community development, our findings illustrate how libraries are political instruments used to address social problems. The intimate council/library relationship depicted by Australian library staff members can be a means of using government resources effectively and reducing redundancy in regards to community programming. According to Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN) and the State Library of Victoria (PLV), Victorian public libraries generate on average \$4.30 of benefits for a local community to every \$1.00 that is invested.<sup>46</sup> The thematic analyses in both Canada and Australia also told a narrative of how older adult programming and services are driven and motivated by a desire to mitigate social issues, such as social isolation. This narrative is consistent with a wealth of literature that expounds how public libraries contribute to the social, economic, and cultural wellbeing of communities.

While public libraries are seeking to facilitate opportunities associated with retirement, their focus appeared to be more on mitigating social issues that pertain to an older demographic. As noted above, the eagerness to address social issues demonstrates how public

libraries are an integral social and political resource for communities. Public library staff should be sensitive, however, to how this eagerness may predispose them to rely on deficit-based thinking. Deficit-based thinking within the field of education and adult literacy can be understood as paying attention to how learners may be deprived or disadvantaged'.<sup>47</sup> This approach to program development may lead individuals to marginalize those who are seen as differing from the norm.<sup>47</sup> Deficit-based thinking within the field of older adult programming may thus create conditions that are favourable for compassionate ageism to take root in libraries. Compassionate ageism entails stereotyping older adults as poor, frail and dependent and neglecting to recognize their strengths and capacities.<sup>48</sup> Using an asset-based approach to program development, focusing on the capacities of individuals rather than their deficits, is thus an important recommendation given in PLVN and PLV's (2019) report, *Reading and Literacy for All*.<sup>49</sup> A recognition of the assets of older adults was apparent when interviewees discussed the benefit of having older adults as volunteers. Incorporating this recognition into other areas of services and programs may support public library staff in fostering and innovating community spaces characterized by inclusivity, accessibility, learning, leisure, and social connection.

The intimate relationship between public libraries and government brought out in the Australian portion of this project also illustrates how libraries are tied closely to democracy. While governments give strategic direction to public libraries, influence how they are understood within their communities, and provide their funding, public libraries create conditions necessary for democratic action.<sup>50</sup> These democratic conditions can be equated to Jürgen Habermas' (1984) concept of the ideal speech situation, which denotes the ideal of a situation where individuals come together to discuss ideas freely, without fear of repercussion, and where everyone has equal opportunity to learn, listen, and speak.<sup>51</sup> Within this situation, communities can formulate a shared understanding of the public will, which in turn determines political decisions.<sup>51</sup> This 'ideal speech situation' occurs within the public sphere, the social spaces that bridge private and public domains by fostering discussion and the sharing of ideas.<sup>51</sup>

Democratic principles, such as freedom of political participation, may be encumbered when individuals experience marginalization. Public libraries thus maintain or reinforce democratic principles by seeking to promote social equality and inclusion.<sup>52</sup> The nature of how people engage within the public sphere is changing due to an evolving technological landscape.<sup>37</sup> As indicated within our findings and literature, an evolving technological landscape may have particular ramifications for the political and social inclusion of older adults.<sup>13,53</sup> Digital literacy training and makers spaces exemplify how libraries strengthen experiences of citizenship. By showcasing how public libraries seek to enhance the knowledge, skills, and opportunities of older adults, our findings encapsulate the potential of public libraries to be an important institution that eases transitions associated with a continually evolving technological landscape and population aging.

## **Recommendations**

Findings from this comparison of Australian and Canadian public library services may have practical implications for public libraries. Recommendations on how public libraries may use our findings to inform their services and programming efforts are listed below.

1. To co-design programs that target older adults with older adults; finding illustrated how eliciting the perspectives of older adults provides a foundation for developing effective

programs. Viewing older adults as ‘co-designers’ may be a means of explicitly drawing attention to the important role that older adults can play in program development.

2. To intentionally incorporate asset-based thinking into program development.
3. To continue offering and potentially increase the number of structured volunteer opportunities; These opportunities can both mitigate staff capacity issues when it comes to offering programs for older adults and provide a platform for older adults to engage meaningfully within their communities. To ensure that these opportunities are filled, public library staff may need to strengthen the marketing of these opportunities among older adults.
4. To create opportunities for house-bound library users to benefit from the library’s physical ‘welcoming and accessible’ spaces; Participants demonstrated that they make efforts to create a welcoming and accessible environment for all library users and they are committed to serving those who are house-bound. Facilitating these opportunities could take the form of a ‘carpooling group’, where volunteers pick up library users at scheduled times to bring them to the library and drop them off at their homes.
5. A) To consider (or potentially continue) providing training on cultural humility and community development for library staff.  
B) To consider hiring community development specialists and social workers in order to lessen the challenge of meeting diverse community needs.  
C) To build community partnerships with community development specialists and social workers that support librarians in their day-to-day community building work. The co-location of public libraries within community centres may be a natural way of maintaining these types of partnerships. Alternatively, the co-location of the library with other community services could entail the library giving ‘office’ space or a desk to relevant organisations. More research is needed that documents the outcomes of co-locating libraries with other community and recreational services.  
D) To explicitly incorporate a recognition of the time and staff capacity required to build and sustain strategic community/council/library partnerships in library staff job descriptions and budgets.
6. To develop (or continue) efforts to document the impacts of public libraries on the lives of older adults using both qualitative and quantitative indicators; These indicators may be important when demonstrating the library’s social and cultural value in a precarious policy environment.<sup>28</sup> Documentation of qualitative indicators may take the form of a campaign taking place in Victoria entitled *Libraries Change Lives*. This initiative presents a platform for community members to share stories about how they have benefited from their local public library.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

By comparing findings from thematic analyses and environmental scans in Australia and Canada, this research illustrates how Canadian and Australian public libraries emulate one another in regards to their older adult programs and services and the processes used to develop and evaluate them; Public library staff use community engagement, strategic partnerships, and experimentation to craft programs and services that target the social and informational wants older adults. They seek to leverage the knowledge of local governments to identify and then equip older adults to overcome challenges and take advantage of opportunities associated with later life. This study paints Canadian and Australian public libraries as both

grassroots (spaces of community engagement) and top-down (directed by political bodies) organizations. It illustrates how these grassroots top-down organizations can support communities in leveraging opportunities and easing societal transitions associated with population aging and a continually evolving technological landscape. There may be room for Canadian and Australian libraries to learn from one another in regards to how they create spaces that are inclusive of all community members regardless of age yet sensitive to the distinct conditions common among older adults, such as retirement, caregiving roles, and potentially dementia. Future research is needed to elicit the perspectives of how older adults within Australia and Canada experience library programs, services, and volunteer opportunities.

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### **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

Program Development	1) How do you see older adults using the library?  2) What programs are older adults drawn to?  3) Why do you see/not see older adults as requiring their own programming?
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	<p>4) If your library offers programs specific for older adults, when did these programs become part of the library's offerings?</p> <p>5) How do you determine what older adults want from the library?</p> <p>6) Do you think the library is meeting these wants? How is it determined whether a program is successful?</p>
Dementia-Friendly Programming	<p>7) Do you encounter older adults with memory loss issues?</p> <p>8) Do you provide dementia-friendly programs or programs developed with this population in mind?</p> <p>9) Who develops and implements these programs (the library directly, a partner organization, or a combination)?</p> <p>10) How are these programs funded?</p>
Training & Research	<p>11) Do staff members partake in training relevant to working with older adults? Is there training that supports staff in working with people with dementia?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who offers this training?</li> <li>What does this training look like?</li> <li>Who participates? Is it mandated?</li> <li>Do you think it is effective?</li> </ol> <p>12) What is the relationship between training and programming?</p> <p>13) Does the library partner with researchers/universities to conduct research? If so, what do you see the impact of this relationship being on the library?</p>
Organization	<p>14) How is your older adult programming organized or dispersed within the library?</p> <p>15) What challenges do you face in providing programming for older adults?</p> <p>16) Where do you see the library going next in this area?</p>