

Promoting Mental Health through accessing the Arts



Within this report mention is made of a set of standards for Arts organisations. VicHealth's Audience Access Standards can be found at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/audienceaccess

Promoting Mental Health through Accessing Arts



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Background

Since 2001 VicHealth has supported medium and large arts organisations to undertake strategies to make their organisations health promoting and more accessible to those who are otherwise unlikely to attend. A total of 16 Victorian organisations have been funded under the Major Arts Partnership Scheme (2001-2004) and the Audience Access Scheme 2005-2006.

This publication is a reflection on the experiences of the organisations in these schemes. It aims to capture some of the major learnings from the two schemes and place them in the context of VicHealth's commitment to the promotion of mental health and wellbeing.

It is hoped that other organisations may benefit from the work done and use this publication to apply to their own arts setting.

About VicHealth

Promoting health is a powerful, cost effective and efficient way to maintain a healthier community. Everybody has a right to good health and the quality of life it brings.

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, or VicHealth, forms partnerships with different groups to make health a central component of our daily lives. Its activity is geared to promoting good health, safety and preventing ill health. Essentially, VicHealth works with others to build healthy foundations for the future.

It does this by working for all Victorians, through partnerships at all levels of government and in different sectors and by creating innovative programs based on research and evaluation. This, in turn, helps others who can influence good health. Working with others also creates a broader base from which to draw solutions.

VicHealth's position as a member of the International Network of Health Promotion Foundations gives it access to national and global health interests, strengthening its ability to promote and advocate good health.

Promoting mental health and wellbeing

One major focus of VicHealth is the promotion of mental health and wellbeing.

VicHealth defines mental health as the:

*embodiment of social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Mental health provides individuals with the vitality necessary for active living, to achieve goals and to interact with one another in ways that are respectful and just.*¹

Mental health problems and disorders are prevalent and are predicted to contribute an increasing proportion to the total burden of disease in coming decades. Poor mental health has serious human, social and economic consequences.

It is important that appropriate care and treatment programs are in place for those experiencing mental ill-health. However, there is increasing recognition internationally that the costs of treating mental health problems and disorders are well beyond the capacities of most countries and that the growing burden is unlikely to be reduced through treatment alone.

*At the same time, there is emerging evidence of opportunities to prevent many mental health problems and of the social and economic benefits of positive mental health. This suggests the need for a dual approach involving treatment and rehabilitation of those suffering mental ill-health while at the same time investing in strategies to promote mental health and wellbeing and to prevent problems developing.*²

VicHealth identifies three determinants of mental health and these underpin everything in this publication. The determinants comprise:

- Social inclusion.
- Freedom from discrimination and violence.
- Access to economic resources.

Policy Context

There is considerable synergy between VicHealth's commitments and the policies of the State Government, even though promoting mental health and wellbeing is not explicitly mentioned. The broader idea of access underpins much of what is written. For example, Arts Victoria released a major policy in 2003.³ It argues:

- Audiences need to be built by making the arts more available and accessible.
- Special emphasis should be placed on under-represented groups including people from regional Victoria, outer metropolitan areas, those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and young people.
- By participating in cultural activities, individuals and communities can address issues of health and wellbeing.
- Cultural expression enables us to respect and embrace difference, and to establish identity and a sense of engagement with society.
- The arts can assist in economic recovery and renewal and build a more resilient society.

KEY POINTS

- 1 Mental ill-health is increasingly important in the overall burden of disease.
- 2 VicHealth focuses on mental *health* and not *illness*. Prevention of ill-health is critical.
- 3 VicHealth identifies three determinants of mental health and wellbeing:
 - Social inclusion.
 - Freedom from discrimination and violence.
 - Access to economic resources.
- 4 There is a current synergy between VicHealth's concerns, independent research, business practices and government policies.

¹ VicHealth 1999, *Mental Health Promotion Plan 1999—2002*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.

² VicHealth 2005, *A plan for action 2005—2007: Promoting mental health and wellbeing*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne. Available at: <www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/VH%20action%20plan-web.pdf>.

³ Arts Victoria 2003, *Creative capacity + arts for all Victorians – A policy framework for the next decade*, Victorian Government, Melbourne. Available at: <www.arts.vic.gov.au/arts/publications/publications/creativecapacity+.htm>.

This arts policy was strengthened by the State Government's *A fairer Victoria*.⁴ This policy crosses all ministries and sets the agenda for significant funding over the next few years.

The policy recognises that some communities and individuals suffer considerable disadvantage in terms of their access to available resources and services:

All Victorians share an interest in addressing disadvantage because of its negative impact on the entire community. Disadvantage not only affects the lives and aspirations of individual Victorians, restricting their capacity to achieve their full potential, it also leads to deep divisions within society and results in higher costs for the wider community in areas such as crime, poor health and family breakdown. Disadvantage also undermines Victoria's capacity to develop the skilled and educated workforce needed to sustain strong economic and productivity growth and maintain high living standards.

The policy and the accompanying funding schemes are designed to reduce this disadvantage by:

- Ensuring universal services provide equal opportunity for all.
- Reducing barriers to opportunity.
- Strengthening assistance to disadvantaged groups.
- Providing targeted support to the highest risk areas.
- Involving communities in decisions affecting their lives and making it easier to work with government.

This broad policy support for the central commitments that underpin the work of VicHealth are not confined to Victoria. The United Kingdom, for example, has a strong focus on social inclusion, and part of this is the contribution the arts can make.⁵

The European Commission takes a similar approach:

*Involvement in the arts and creative activity is thus a very important tool in the activation and reintegration of those individuals and groups who are most distant from the labour market and who have the lowest levels of participation in society. Community arts projects also can play an important role in the regeneration of local communities and in the work of neighbourhood groups.*⁶

Not-for-profit organisations and other researchers are exploring similar issues.⁷

Sometimes, health promotion can be seen as somewhat peripheral to *arts* organisations' core business as, primarily, they are arts organisations. However, the significant overlap with government policies and the nature of current debates mean major arts organisations need to be able to present their work in ways that demonstrate their commitment and contribution to mental health promotion. Promoting mental health is another 'string to your bow'. This string is likely to become more important to funders and community leaders in the foreseeable future. There needs to be a recognition, though, that it takes time, continuity of effort and resources.

Of course, the arts can be viewed solely as ends in themselves. However, being able to demonstrate an appreciation of the policy context and the positive contribution being made differentiates arts organisations and highlights particular skills and aspirations of the company or arts institution. Funders are constantly looking at ways through which they can add value to their investments in the arts.

4 Department of Premier and Cabinet 2005, *A fairer Victoria*, Victorian Government, Melbourne.

5 Social exclusion is a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown. See: <www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk>. Specifically for the arts, the UK's efforts are summarised by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's Policy Action Team 10, available at: <<http://www.socialexclusion.gov.uk/publications.asp?fid=7>>.

6 See: Community Action Programs on Social Exclusion 2005, *The role of culture in preventing and reducing poverty and social exclusion*, European Commission, Brussels, available at: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/social_inclusion/publications_en.htm>.

7 See, for example: Barraket, J 2005, *Putting people in the picture? The role of the arts in social inclusion*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne. Available at: <<http://www.bsl.org.au/main.asp?PageId=1978>> and Morton Smyth Limited 2004, I, Morton Smyth, Edinburgh. Available at: <http://www.newaudiences.org.uk/feature.php?essential_audiences_20040601_1>.

The rhetoric concerning support for the arts is changing. For example, the chairman of Unilever in the UK wrote:

The Unilever Series [of major sculptures occupying the turbine hall of the Tate Modern museum in London] reflects Unilever's passion for creativity, innovation and our new corporate mission – to add vitality to life. To us vitality is about more than health and wellbeing; it is about enjoyment, stimulation and quality of life in its broadest sense.

The current debate about corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an example of how arts organisations and their traditional sponsors can be receptive to a focus on the community's health and wellbeing. This can take a variety of forms.

Under the banner: *Enlightened self-interest – Success hangs on rewarding values*, John McFarlane, the CEO of the ANZ bank was quoted as saying:

[The approach]...is much more than the proclamation of corporate values, or centrally driven corporate responsibility programs. People are looking for meaning and the opportunities to work for companies that stand for something beyond making money and maximising shareholder returns ... At a board and executive level, it involves applying organisational values, policies and decision-making frameworks that enable a company to identify and respond to economic, social and environmental issues and opportunities.⁸

The convergence of trends in the private sector, government policy, the broader academic literature and the commitments of VicHealth offer an extraordinary opportunity. Arts organisations can be pivotal in promoting this agenda.

Mental health promotion (particularly in terms of social inclusion, valuing diversity and access to economic resources) is central to what the arts do and the ways in which they engage communities.

⁸ *The Age* 2006, Business, 9 March, p. 10.

VicHealth and the arts

VicHealth has a long tradition of supporting the arts. VicHealth enters into partnerships with arts organisations to promote health, particularly mental health and wellbeing.

VicHealth's major emphasis is on the level and type of access that marginalised people have to arts organisations' work and operation. VicHealth identifies rural, Indigenous and culturally diverse communities, and young people more generally as requiring special attention; however, there may be a good rationale to target other groups that are important in a particular location.

Arts organisations are also asked to focus on social inclusion, particularly of people who are marginalised because of one or a number of causes. These causes can include:

- Income.
- Age.
- Gender.
- Location.
- Cultural background.

There is now strong evidence that people who are marginalised or vulnerable have poorer health outcomes than those who have strong community connections, are valued, safe, exercise a degree of control over their lives, and who are economically well-off.

Barriers to Access


The way to achieve equity of access is to look at target populations such as people in poverty, older people or women. Having a clear image of the target group enables the arts organisation to identify the specific barriers these groups face regarding access. Activities need to be found to overcome, or at least alleviate these barriers.

Activity #1

Identify your target groups regarding access. Why have you chosen this group? What barriers do they experience generally? What barriers do they experience because of your current activities or way of working? How can these be alleviated in the short term? How can the approaches be made sustainable? How can your success at breaking down the barriers be judged?

KEY POINTS

- 1 VicHealth has a partnership relationship with arts organisations that focuses on the community's mental health and wellbeing.
- 2 VicHealth emphasises marginalised individuals and communities.
- 3 Particular groups face different barriers to getting access to the arts.
- 4 Most marginalised groups experience a range of barriers rather than a single one.



There are numerous general barriers, but these need to be interpreted specifically in terms of the target population and the arts organisation's current commitments. Transport, for example, will mean different things in rural areas compared to urban ones. Barriers to access are not the same for every population. The most common barriers to participation in the arts include:

- The location of the event or activity.
- The manner in which the event is marketed.
- Signage and the physical layout of the venue.
- Cost.
- Transport.
- Timing of the event.
- Perceptions of safety.

There are two other barriers that are harder to pin down and more difficult to counter:

- There can be a view that an art form or what goes on in a particular venue is 'not for us'. This could include the work being seen as too 'high brow'. People need to see themselves in what happens.
- The cultural 'position' and resonance of the work might only appeal to a particular age or population group.

There is rarely only one barrier to access. Normally, the lack of access is caused by a number of barriers acting together. Consequently, multifaceted and multidisciplinary approaches are necessary so a range of people within the organisation address a number of barriers to access simultaneously.

The arts, mental health and wellbeing: Creating health-promoting arts organisations

Health promotion can be an illusive concept and the relationship with the arts is not always apparent. Practitioners often assume the arts are good for people; but without argument, such an assumption can leave the sceptics unconvinced.

To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, the arts are stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. They help us define who we are as communities, Australians, and ultimately as human beings. They create a shared story that helps us define our culture, community and values. The arts can be seen as a form of inquiry that enables us to think about who we are, where have been and where we are going.⁹

The arts are quintessentially about social inclusion. The *experience* of participating in the arts is also social. Groups go to theatres, galleries and museums. Even if there is no overt interaction, there is a sense of being part of something bigger than the individual.

A feature of the arts is that a single story can sustain a number of different interpretations. Each audience member or viewer brings something of themselves and enters a 'dialogue' with the work; and each work should be robust enough to accommodate a *variety* of interpretations while giving a *common* expression of the human condition. The dialogue enables us to reflect on our lives, motivations and reactions.

One of the advantages of the arts is that they can use language, but also move beyond it. As Susan Day Sclater argues:

*The great value ... of the arts is the way that representations can capture so much that is significant for the human subject that cannot easily be captured in words. In particular, art can express not only ambiguity and ambivalence but also tension and contradiction—inevitable characteristics of our world and of the psyche—that tend to be obscured in our quest for the comforts of certainty, reflected in language.*¹⁰

The arts can also define communities and individual identities in diverse ways; there is not a single way of being Australian. The arts can present different viewpoints and redefine Australia to include different images of identity. Therefore, valuing diversity is central to the arts. For example, La Mama theatre actively seeks plays that are on the cutting-edge of Australian society, people with disabilities are central to many of the programs at Footscray Community Arts Centre, and HotHouse Theatre commissions work by Indigenous playwrights.

The final determinant of mental health and wellbeing can be more difficult to address. This has a dual focus: first for the patrons and second for the internal working of the organisation.

Artists and arts organisations are seldom wealthy and often rely on external funding and generous patrons. There are, though, ways of building in access to economic resources into the work of the organisation. The obvious way is to acknowledge that cost can be a barrier to participation in the arts. Providing free or low-cost tickets to some events can be one way of addressing this, although it is not the sole solution to greater participation.

Over the last few years, a number of studies have emphasised the economic benefits afforded by the arts. More recently, there also have been efforts to extend a limited view of economic value to embrace the broader notion of cultural value.¹¹


KEY POINTS

- 1 The arts are about social inclusion and valuing diversity, and they can contribute to greater access to economic resources among marginalised populations.

9 Throsby, D 2006, *Does Australia need a cultural policy? (Platform Papers No. 7)*, Currency House, Strawberry Hills, NSW.

10 Day Sclater, S 2003, 'The arts and narrative research—arts as inquiry: an epilogue', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 621–624.

11 See, for example: Noonan, D 2003, 'Contingent valuation and cultural resources: a meta-analytic review of the literature', *Journal of Cultural Economics*, vol. 27, pp. 159–176, and Throsby, D 2001, *Economics and culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.



Arts organisations can also see themselves as an economic resource to be shared among new and emerging artists or by other people wanting to engage in cultural pursuits. For example, internships, traineeships or residencies have all been used to broaden the work of particular institutions by bringing in the voices of those who have been traditionally marginalised.

Through its arts ambassadors program, the National Gallery of Victoria provided training to young people who were unemployed and marginalised in a variety of other ways. The program enabled them to participate in many of the gallery's activities and the young people were paid for this work.

Similarly, HotHouse used internships to partner with local employment programs and provide some young people with a paid training experience of working in the profession. All medium-sized arts organisations are complex and afford a number of opportunities that can provide meaningful and enjoyable work experiences for people who are excluded from other industries.

These approaches benefit the emerging cultural workers by affording them access to economic resources, and by providing experiences that may lead to more permanent employment within the same or a different arts organisation.

The challenge VicHealth presents in promoting mental health and wellbeing is to address the three determinants in localised ways. This should be done across the whole of the organisation and not be simply confined to a single project or an isolated section of the organisation's operations. VicHealth is interested in a whole-of-organisation approach.

Hopefully, the central concepts of health promotion should inform many of the major decisions made within the organisation. The trick is to find natural synergies between current and planned work and mental health promotion, and to embed these into the organisation's everyday actions. Commitment to mental health promotion and wellbeing may emanate from short-term project funding, but this should be the catalyst for long-term and sustainable change.

Changing the whole organisation is not easy and takes time. A useful starting point is professional development for workers who see themselves as peripheral to promoting mental health and wellbeing. This could include training front-of-house staff to be more welcoming, or helping those people who are responsible for programming to identify and diversify current audiences.

Activity #2

What are your current strengths in promoting mental health and wellbeing? Which of these are characteristic of the way your organisation as a whole works? What opportunities are there for change? How are you planning to effect the change? What do you need to do to bring about change across the organisation?

Using standards to clarify the actions of a health-promoting arts organisation

VicHealth developed a set of service standards to clarify the image of an arts organisation that actively promotes mental health and wellbeing among patrons and within the agency itself. They provided a benchmark of good practice against which arts organisations can monitor their progress in health promotion. They also provide a planning framework that can then be used to reflect on current activities.

There is a significant emphasis on evidence because this is increasingly important in public policy and public health. Evidence can take different forms. The form will depend on the purpose and the audience: *Who needs to know what, and why do they need to know it?*

The standards¹² are organised under three headings:

- Creating a healthy, safe and inclusive environment and culture.
- Developing programs and projects that promote access, social inclusion and mental health and wellbeing.
- Forming community links and partnerships.

These headings are derived from VicHealth's Mental Health and Wellbeing program. There are four standards under each of the headings. These appear as outcome statements of what is good practice in AAS, even though the methods of reaching the outcome will differ.

The range of standards needs to map the program and what is currently understood as good practice. However, there is an 'aspirational' aspect of standards so they are slightly beyond what is the current norm in the sector.

KEY POINTS

- 1 A health promoting arts organisation will:
 - Create a healthy, safe and inclusive environment and culture.
 - Develop programs and projects that promote access, social inclusion and mental health and wellbeing.
 - Form community links and partnerships.
- 2 Map activities using standards.
- 3 Common standards need to be interpreted within the context of the organisation.
- 4 Contexts vary and each arts organisation needs to be responsive to its individual context.

Activity #3

Become familiar with the standards described in the appendix. Work through the standards and rank your organisation against each of them. Pay particular attention to gathering supportive evidence. Just because someone *thinks* something is the case does not mean that it actually happens, no matter how persuasive their argument. It might be worth breaking the standards into three sections and dealing with them at different times, or getting groups to work simultaneously on each of the sections. The more staff and other stakeholders are involved, the greater the expertise and commitment they will develop. Some people may find it difficult to see how mental health promotion is relevant to their work. Think of imaginative examples of how the concept of wellbeing can apply to their work. This might include internal structures and working conditions.

This activity may take some weeks or even months.

¹² A copy of the audience access standards appears as an appendix.

Over time, organisations can rank their progress in meeting each standard as part of their evaluation of their work. Ranking should occur on the basis of evidence. Evidence can take different forms and is likely to include:

- Written policies and other publications such as flyers and media releases.
- Structures within the organisation that determine how decisions are made and by whom.
- Programs offered within the organisations.
- Viewpoints of current or potential stakeholders. This could range from one-to-one interviews or more formal surveys.
- Selection of one or two events or practices from within the organisation that exemplify how that organisation acts as a whole. (It is important to remember, though, a single example that is atypical is not very convincing evidence.)

Activity #4

Following the standards, think about the most appropriate type of evidence that is currently available within your organisation:

- Will the evidence generated assist in meeting the standards?
- Will the evidence lead to better decision-making regarding mental health promotion?
- Is the type of evidence to be gathered an efficient use of resources?
- Are the skills for gathering and analysing the evidence already within the organisation?
- What are the areas you will need to supplement the evidence that is already available?

Within each standard, a series of questions is posed that provides an indication of the sorts of things that would need to be addressed if the standard is to be met. The questions go some way in setting the parameters for the standard. They are in the form of questions because evaluation and quality improvement occur in the context of a dialogue. The questions are prompts for this dialogue.

A hypothetical example is provided under each question. The examples give an indication of the range of activities that might be cited as evidence. They demonstrate how evidence is gathered and presented to support the standard.

In the following section, the standards are grouped under headings. The examples are provided mainly from the work of the three mentor organisations funded under AAS. The examples emphasise the way in which the organisation met the standards under scrutiny.

Standard 1

Creating a healthy, safe and inclusive environment and culture

Standard 1.1

The organisation contributes to social inclusion and mental health promotion through policy and planning.

Standard 1.2

The arts environment is welcoming and respects diversity among patrons and staff.

Standard 1.3

Arts activities take place in healthy, safe and inclusive environments.

This group of standards emphasises the policy framework that underpins the programming decisions and the structure of the arts organisation. Policies set the tone of the organisation and give an indication of the working culture that exists among staff and their relationship with their community. The structures and governance of the organisation should reflect its commitment to the promotion of mental health and wellbeing. There should also be a synergy between these commitments and the physical layout of the organisation and the way it is run.

Many regulations have a direct and (sometimes) indirect impact on the promotion of mental health and wellbeing. They can focus on such things as mandated occupational health and safety. There can also be policies that have been developed within the organisation such as equal opportunity and anti-bullying.

The Experience of Footscray Community Arts Centre

Footscray Community Arts Centre is a world-class community arts precinct based around historic Henderson House on the banks of the Maribyrnong River, which runs through the western suburbs of Melbourne. This is the traditional land of the Wurrundjeri peoples, and their prior ownership is acknowledged in the centre's major policy publications.

The centre's mission and positioning are about changing lives with and through the arts. There are strong and explicitly stated efforts to create new art for new audiences through new types of interactions with the community. This is achieved by artistic excellence underpinned by diverse forms, media and cultures. The work of the centre takes account of the major issues facing human society and being Australian in the 21st century. These issues, though, are explored in the context of the western suburbs of Melbourne. The epithet: *Think and act globally, deliver locally* is used in policies and by staff as a guiding principle.

Two strong themes run through the centre's mission, policies and programs:

- Artistic innovation and integrity.
- Social inclusion.

These themes are intertwined, reinforce each other, and define how each term is used. Innovative work pushes the boundaries of artistic expression; it is not pursued for its own sake. It is tempered by a sophisticated understanding of the potential artistic role of community and cultural development, and the centre's local area and diverse cultural and ethnic mix. The western region of Melbourne comprises more than 165 different ethnic groups, and these have changed over time as it is the home for many newly arrived migrants and refugees.

KEY POINTS

- 1 There should be clear and logical links between:
 - The organisation's mission, objectives, plans and policies.
 - Governance structures.
 - Physical layout of venues.
 - Staffing procedures.
 - Programs.
 - Presentation of the organisation to its community.
- 2 Each of the above points should address the promotion of mental health and wellbeing explicitly or implicitly.
- 3 Opportunities should be sought to state, or at least enhance, the role the organisation plays in promoting mental health and wellbeing

These two themes are supported by four major strategies:

- Producing community-focused projects, more long-term programs and one-off events. Curatorial support helps the community hone the quality and level of their work.
- Providing a venue for developing and presenting outstanding community-focused art. This work is created *with* communities as part of the ongoing artistic program, and *by* communities where external groups use the spaces.
- Enabling other community-based organisations (such as the Western Bulldogs) to find artistic expressions for their work.
- Advocating for a redefined concept of community arts. Many organisations want to engage and work with community but are unsure how to do it.

The centre's work challenges the notion of a mainstream form of artistic expression that is suitable for everyone.

Robyn Archer¹³ suggests that the mainstream is a myth designed to maintain the power of those people who already have access to the arts:

She argues that for the arts to fulfil their potential and make a contribution to the vibrancy of the community, robust debate is essential.

Footscray Community Arts Centre works to redefine the field of community cultural development by emphasising artistic excellence, community engagement, social inclusion and the celebration of diversity.

For example, there is a workshop program that aims to bring together people of different ages. Another program, ArtLife, works with people with disabilities and enables them to participate in arts activities and develop life skills.

The standard of the work is not compromised because many of the participants are inexperienced; specialists are often engaged to work with particular populations, such as people with disabilities. In addition, community cultural development incubators support the growth of various groups associated with the centre. Such groups are supported to move to a new professional level through training, formal incorporation or the pursuit of a new artistic direction.

In 2006, the incubators comprise groups that are often marginalised and include:

- The circus group POW (performing older women).
- Youth theatre groups Y3P (Young People's Performance Projects) and SCRAYP – Youth Arts with an Edge.
- The Multicultural Choir.
- Hip hop event producers, Jungle City.

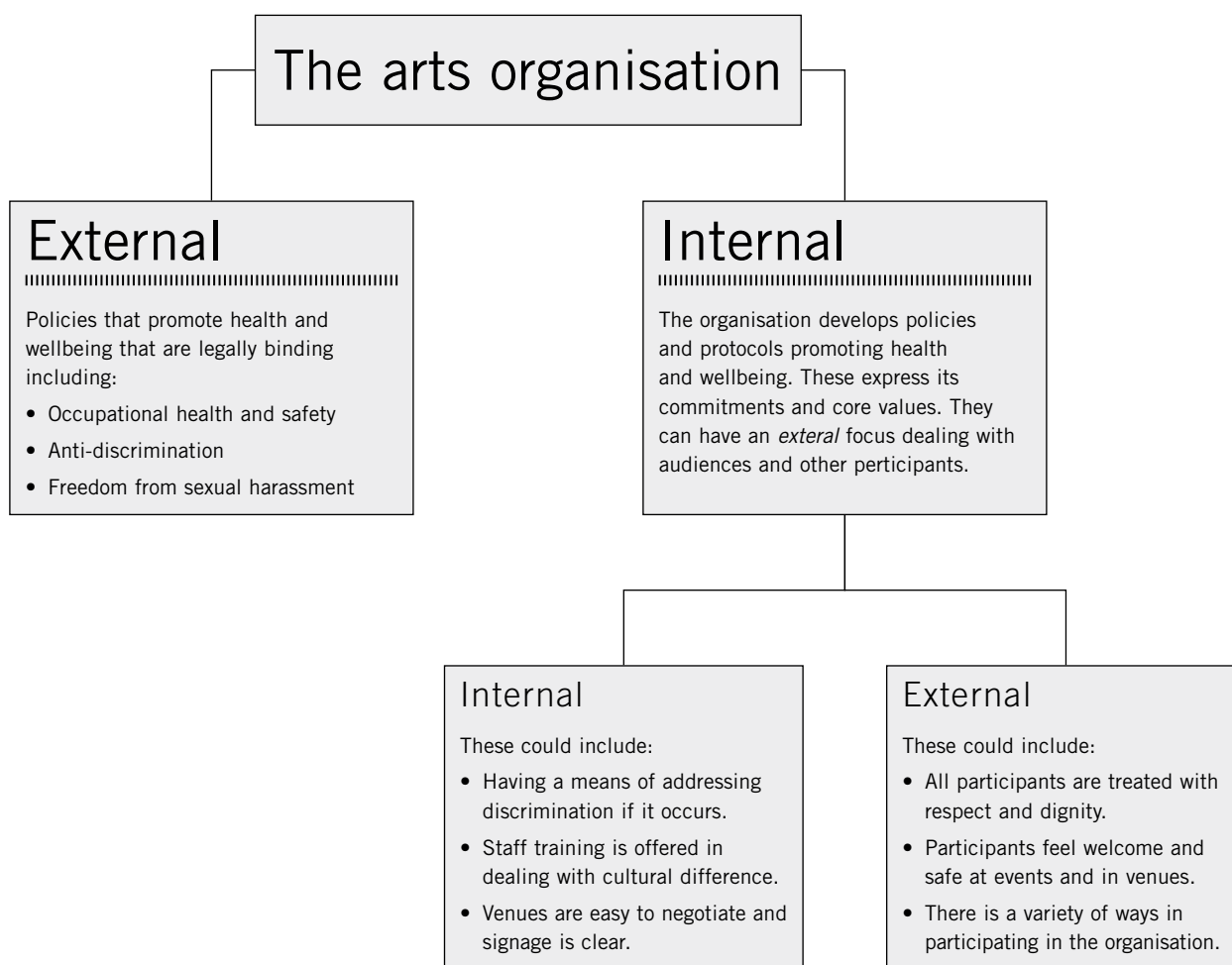
Encouraging groups that started at the centre to become independent has been an important process of community empowerment and self-determination that has revitalised the centre and sustained innovation within the work.

The level of innovation and social inclusion is sustained because there is a logical, coherent and apparent link between the component parts.

13 Archer, R 2005, *The myth of the mainstream (Platform Papers No. 4)*, Currency House, Strawberry Hills.

The organisation's mission, objectives, plans and policies

At Footscray Community Arts Centre, health-promoting policies and protocols have an impact on its operations at different levels. Some are easier to implement because they are mandated by government and supported by legislation. The ones that are locally developed to suit the particular circumstances can be more time-consuming because support among stakeholders is necessary.



Governance structures

There are many ways of getting involved at Footscray Community Arts Centre ranging from being part of an audience for a single event, taking classes, putting on a show or being a regular volunteer, to membership of the board. In all cases, staff make considerable efforts to ensure participation takes account of stakeholders' opinions, and reflects the constituency of the community that the centre represents.

The approaches used by staff include encouragement, outreach and, in some cases, formal memoranda of understanding between the centre and its partners. There are conscious efforts to develop a language of community development, engagement and wellbeing as a way of enhancing stakeholders' critical faculties in making and promoting community-based art.

Physical layout of venues

While Footscray Community Arts Centre occupies a spectacular position overlooking the Maribyrnong River, it is in an historic and heritage-listed house and its primary orientation is toward the river and away from the street. It is not a particularly welcoming venue; however, it does have wheelchair access to all areas and some free parking.

While the centre exists as a physical space for high-quality arts practice, it is much more than a building. It is also a *conceptual* space for the development of new ideas. In addition, it is an *iconic* space that is known within the region as one where new partnerships of organisations are formed.

A coffee shop is operated from the premises and this spills out to the lawn area adjacent to the street. This is a vibrant place that brings people into the centre. It also creates a sense of activity, and people meet there and get a coffee and light meals. It is a place to 'hang out'. The shop draws people in and adds to the friendly ambiance of the whole centre. Participants in the centre see it 'as their space'. For example, it is important for people with disabilities to feel as if they belong because they excluded from so many commercially-run organisations.

The coffee shop does not have an exclusive licence. The centre acknowledges that food is one of the major expressions of community. Participants are encouraged to provide food as part of their work because it is a way of reaching out to others.

The centre is in the process of redevelopment. Part of the brief for the architect has been to:

- Provide a safe and interesting environment for developing outstanding ideas in collaboration with diverse communities and artists.
- Accommodate communities with ranging abilities and social needs in the development of projects, participation and engagement.
- Improve access to the centre by enhancing signage for culturally diverse communities and people with disabilities, and ensuring the environment is well lit and safe.

Budgets

Budgets are formulated to fulfil the centre's core commitments. This includes, for example, making as many events free as possible. However, there is also a recognition that transport is a major barrier to access and participation. Transport costs are built into the financing of all the activities within the centre. As mentioned, shared food is a great creator of communities and groups are encouraged to build this into their programs and will, if necessary, be subsidised by the centre.

Unfortunately, arts funding is often not recurrent and the centre has to argue for its vision and role in community wellbeing fairly frequently.

Staffing procedures

Engagement with the community and the valuing of diversity are central to the way in which staff operate. For example, the job description of the program coordinator includes, in part:

- Managing the sourcing of individuals, groups and communities for involvement in the artistic program
- Working with communities to develop participation, outcomes and increased access in the artistic program

Reflection and improvement are also built into this role so the centre is dynamic and continues to develop.

Programs

In addition to those already cited, numerous programs have been designed to work with community members, many of whom are not traditional theatregoers.

These programs included Big Top Hop. As part of the 2006 Commonwealth Games Cultural Program, four community groups from low socioeconomic and disadvantaged areas across Melbourne and high-calibre artists participated in a hip hop show within a circus big top tent set up in Melbourne's Alexandra Gardens. The centre coordinated the community engagement process of this project as a result of an approach by Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival.

Crowd Theory was a body of work that explored ideas of community and the nature of crowds. In late 2004, hundreds of people converged on two sites in Melbourne's western suburbs to participate in two large-scale photo shoots. Two giant photographs were made. Each was over two metres wide, and was made in collaboration with the communities from each site. The exhibition was selected to represent Victoria at an international exhibition at the Alliance Française in Paris and toured Australia. Ten events were planned and formed the basis of a publication. In their detail and complexity, the photos were reminiscent of the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel. So many stories, often untold, formed a single community.

GO was a project that evoked themes of Melbourne's west. In particular, the Western Bulldogs are a powerful symbol of the spirit and aspirations of the region. In general, art and sport are often seen as very different and even opposite expressions of culture. However, via a partnership with the Western Bulldogs, this project drew upon aspects of wellbeing that are common to football and community-focused art. These included team building, community strengthening and participation.

Presentation of the arts organisation to its community

The website that presents the centre to the community is another way in which diversity is valued. There are a number of key downloadable publications in a range of community languages. These function as a welcome and overview of the work, and as an invitation to participate.

Community is defined very broadly and seen as dynamic. The western region now is not the same as it was a decade ago. There is a different ethnic mix and some of newer ethnic groups are just emerging as a community. Communities may seem homogeneous but individuals see themselves in different ways. For example, the so-called African community is comprised of six or seven discrete groupings. Outreach from the centre is characterised by questions rather than statements. The community is asked about issues of concern and the centre tries to reflect these through programs, events and the way decisions are made.

The centre has also introduced the rhetoric of promoting mental health and wellbeing with its major organisational partners such as the City of Maribyrnong. Although this is primarily a partnership and dealt with under standard 3.1, it is also an example of how the centre fulfils its mission and objectives.

Standard 2

Developing programs and projects that promote access, mental health and wellbeing

Standard 2.1

The organisation implements a range of activities and programs that increases access to the arts by marginalised groups.

Standard 2.2

Programs and projects enable people to become socially connected in a variety of ways.

Standard 2.3

The diversity of Australian life is reflected through the content of programs and projects.

Programming is the centrepiece of arts organisations. It is what they do. An organisation needs a program that is attractive to a range of sectors within the community it serves. These standards also recognise the community as heterogeneous. Any physical community is made up of a range of perspectives.

However, there are some populations who seldom participate in the arts because of cost, location, transport and perceptions that the work is exclusive. They don't see the work of the arts as having anything to 'say' to them.

The standards focus on actively targeting potential audiences, and identifying barriers to participation and neutralising these where possible.

Part of the community's heterogeneity is to acknowledge diversity and use the arts to act as a voice for those people and groups who find themselves publicly or politically disempowered. Such an approach can challenge the status quo and be controversial. An arts organisation that is committed to promoting mental health and wellbeing cannot shy away from such controversy but rather needs to manage it. Within VicHealth's work, arts organisations need to broaden the images of what it is to be Australian and how people grapple with the problems of human existence.

Morton Smyth¹⁴ argue that programs designed to attract new audiences should:

- Not just be about putting on popular shows.
- Not be about 'dumbing down'.
- Devise new activities and events that clearly say 'this is for the likes of you'.
- Be realistic in terms of budget and other resources.

KEY POINTS

- 1 A health-promoting arts organisation should:
 - Challenge the notion of an exclusive 'mainstream'.
 - Reflect diversity.
 - Provide a voice to marginalised people and populations.
- 2 The organisation should practise strategies that:
 - **Broaden** the audience by attracting more of the type of people who currently attend.
 - **Deepen** the experience of the current audience by extending the arts experience.
 - **Diversify** the current audience by actively seeking different types of people who attend the work of the organisation.
- 3 Diversification takes time. Specific approaches should be tried, evaluated and, if successful, embedded in the organisation's everyday practices.
- 4 As part of the organisation's commitment to mental health and wellbeing for all the community, audience development should include marginalised groups and address the barriers they face to participation.

14 Op cit.

The Experience of HotHouse Theatre

HotHouse Theatre is the leading regional theatre company in Australia. Its development has not been easy and it remains a work in progress as it responds to its local community. As an annual report notes:

These successes were not accidental. They were the result of strategic policies, excellence in artistic programming and performance, effective leadership and hard work. The remarkable aspect of HotHouse's success is that so many of these fundamentals are apparent and indeed abundant.

At the heart of the HotHouse phenomenon is connection with the community. This includes engaging audiences at the Hume Building Society Butter Factory Wodonga or touring to the tiny towns in the region. The annual Comedy Festival currently brings five shows from the Melbourne Fringe/Comedy Festival to fulfil the growing expectations of what a theatre company should offer. There is ongoing commitment to locally produced work and community involvement in theatre, encouragement for participation in workshops, and offering of training and traineeships. There are efforts to develop young and emerging artists in the Biting Dog Theatre Festival, and the innovative Director's Club has been a very successful means of gaining local patronage, especially by small businesses.

HotHouse's connection to its community is subtle and full of nuances. It is underpinned by the organisation's strong desire to bring high-quality professional theatre to a regional area. The fact that Albury/Wodonga is a considerable distance from capital cities and other theatre companies is no reason, from HotHouse's point of view, to reduce the quality of the work. Over the years, audiences have become more sophisticated and this is reflected in the work. As the artistic manager stated:

When we first discussed the idea of a regional but locally-based theatre, people told us that they wanted to see the same kind of theatre and at the same standard as they would if they lived in Melbourne or Sydney. They didn't want all the plays to deal with the Murray River or other issues related specifically to our region.

This position does not preclude the theatrical exploration of local issues; however, such work has been designed to expand the notion of community. Theatre reinforces some values and simultaneously challenges others. Community does not have to be parochial, nor does it have to pander to a perceived mainstream taste.¹⁵ For example, in the 2006 season, *Embers* was a major new work commissioned by HotHouse. Part of the publicity stated:

*Overnight on 7 and 8 January, in the year 2003, a dry storm ignited over 80 fires in Victoria's northeast and Gippsland. From exhaustive interviews with residents of the region, *Campion Decent* [playwright] has fashioned an extraordinary account of the fires; the heart-stopping tales of survival, the awe-inspiring courage and endurance of communities put to the test, the spine-chilling evocations of the wave of heat that roars through pristine valleys ... and the mountains of sandwiches volunteers anxiously prepared. Gripping, lyrical, comically overwrought when it seems tragic, and deeply moving when all appears lost, *Embers* is the story of a fire and the people who fought it.*

As the original commissioning company, HotHouse Theatre joined the Sydney Theatre Company in presenting the world premiere of *Embers*, which asks the great question of the Australian bush: how do we survive?

The development of *Embers* was important because the voices and stories of local people formed the core of the play. Many of these stories were previously personal and seldom shared, and there were few ways in which individuals could express their experiences. The people and their stories remained isolated. Theatre turned singular voices into an expression of community and a shared statement of survival.

¹⁵ See: Archer, op. cit.

The play's appeal was not simply local because it dealt with broad human themes. It was successful with very different audiences, some of whom had no direct contact with the bushfires. The commissioned works from HotHouse are designed to comment on contemporary culture.

Indigenous people are some of the most marginalised in Australia. Theatre dealing with the issues they face has been important in HotHouse's programming. For example, *Wonderlands* (another commissioned work) dealt with the possession, dispossession, ownership and the sense of community that comes with a connection to the land. These issues are complex and emotionally charged, but they were presented as embedded in an equally strong narrative of relationships, secrets and revelations.

In the 2006 program, *Windmill Baby* was an important contribution. The publicity stated:

Against the Kimberley landscape of red dirt and azure blue skies, Aboriginal woman Maymay Starr returns to an abandoned cattle station to tell the story of a life lived beneath the flickering presence of the station windmill – an all-seeing witness to tales of humour, violence, lust, love and loss.

Winner of the 2003 Patrick White Award, Windmill Baby is the new calling card of Indigenous theatre, told with the poetry of a campfire storyteller and the comedy of a great yarn.

Planning is important and this requires continuity and resources. For example, Wesley Enoch's *Cookie's Table* was commissioned some years before it went into production. The benefits of investing in new works may only be apparent a number of years after the initial commitment.

As already argued, no community is homogeneous. Any arts organisation needs to look closely at its community and set challenges to engage some of the people who potentially could, but do not currently, have access to the arts. This is a continual process. As one barrier to access may be alleviated, further barriers will need active targeting.

HotHouse has looked for new audiences, identified current barriers and worked to overcome them. Isolation is a major problem in the region and there are a great many small towns in remote areas. HotHouse has tried to address this by what is known as 'the small towns tour'.

Ruth Hill was reported in HotHouse's annual report as saying:

People in rural communities appreciate the opportunity to access quality live theatre. However, they are often precluded from participation because of the long distances required to travel. The preparedness of HotHouse to tackle the complexities of undertaking a regional tour program helps bridge that sense of remoteness to the arts.

The tour is much more than the company coming into town, doing the performance and then leaving. HotHouse works with an existing organisation or local community members and builds their capacity to put on a show. They are responsible for marketing, the arrangement of the venue, and sales and community activities that are designed to make the show more memorable. Such activities could include having a community barbeque, organising an after-performance discussion or showcasing local produce. The tour comprises audience and skills development.

The communities pay for the show, but this is subsidised by HotHouse and the State Government. The community keeps the takings. The program is a way of contributing to the economic development of these remote towns.

Remoteness is not the only feature of location that needs to be considered. The major venue is a flexible space; however, for people who are not used to theatres, it may not be completely welcoming. HotHouse takes its shows to the audience when this is appropriate. For example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was performed outside in the caravan park at the height of the holiday season. Many venues are fairly inflexible so taking work out to audiences can be a challenging, but very viable, solution. A backstage tour might also work as a confidence-building introduction to the venue. Similarly, a workshop that builds on participants' narratives can carry the message: This theatre and theatre more generally is for you as much as anybody else.

The timing of an event can also act as a barrier or facilitator to access. A program designed for young mothers and their children could be scheduled during the day rather than in the evening.

Young people are specifically targeted by HotHouse in two ways. The first is The Biting Dog Theatre Festival and the second is the Comedy Festival. The former is a participatory event engaging some 25 or so secondary schools within the region. Young people are involved in every aspect of the presentation from performance to lighting, stage management, lighting and sound.

Each group is provided with a neutral script. This script consists of some dialogue but no stage directions or complex character development. It provides a rough narrative but requires considerable interpretation. Consequently, each presentation of about 30 minutes is completely different from the next, even though there are some similar lines. An extensive information handbook that introduces the young people to the discipline of theatre supports the performances.

Each performance is provided with a critique from a professional panel of theatre workers. The keynote of the whole exercise is the professionalism of the performance event and the work leading up to it. The works are, of course, performed in a professional space with all the trappings the venue provides, and the young people are treated as *if* they are professionals too. The dominant message is one of peer learning. The performances are seen as 'works in progress' and any critique is part of its development. There is no sense of being patronising to the young people; they are treated with respect and as peers of the professional theatre workers.

Students from all schools are encouraged to participate and learn from each other, listen to criticism, and think of ways in which works could be improved. HotHouse has found that participating schools often go through different stages of engagement. They may start by being observers and then the following year may enter the festival. Their first efforts may not be of a very high standard but they learn from their experiences and from their peers. The quality becomes self-referencing as the young people themselves demand higher standards.

The Comedy Festival is the second strategy to engage young people. Although it is part of HotHouse's subscription season, there is extra marketing to young people who do not regularly attend the theatre through tertiary institutions and local youth agencies. The rationale is that an engaging program of short works would encourage a new audience that may attend other shows during the year. Targeted marketing seems to have been successful. Of the people who attended the Comedy Festival in 2004, 66 per cent had never been to a HotHouse show before.

McCarthy and Jinnett (2001) through the RAND Corporation have developed a model for increasing access and developing audiences in the arts.¹⁶ They argue that organisations need to decide that they really want to increase participation and access to their work. Although, in the context of this publication, this is an obvious statement, this is not a goal for some organisations. However, having decided that participation and access are important, McCarthy and Jinnett suggest there are three fundamental ways of achieving it:

Strategy no. 1	Strategy no. 2	Strategy no. 3
Broadening	Deepening	Diversifying
This involves capturing a larger share of the existing market by attracting individuals who constitute a natural audience for the arts but are not currently participants.	This involves giving current participants a greater level of involvement in the arts than they currently have.	This approach tries to attract completely new markets comprising those individuals who typically would not see themselves as participating in the arts. This is VicHealth's focus because its emphasis is on marginalised populations whose access to the arts is limited.
<i>We know exactly who our demographic is. It is a married woman who lives in Armadale in Melbourne. Currently, we just get 5 per cent. We just want more of them.</i>	<i>We've tried a few things over the last few years. These have included having a 'meet the actors' after some shows, and we give discounts to subscribers to the backstage tours we run.</i>	<i>This is the hardest thing to do because it takes time, continuity and money. It is a real challenge because we sometimes don't know the barriers they face; and we also have to look after our existing constituency.</i>

The quotes were derived from interviews with arts organisations.

Activity #5

As part of your planning process, look at the activities you currently have in place to increase access to your work for new audiences. Categorise them under the headings of:

- Broadening.
- Deepening.
- Diversifying.

If most of your activities fit into the first two categories, discuss how you might strengthen what you are currently doing regarding diversification. Once you have a list of what you might be able to achieve, think about the barriers that might hinder your progress. Which of these could you overcome within current funding and structures? Which would require some radical changes?

¹⁶ McCarthy, K & Jinnett, K 2001, *A new framework for building participation in the arts*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA. Available at: <www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1323>.

Standard 3

Forming community links and partnerships

Standard 3.1

The organisation is involved in, and actively contributes to, community debates on the importance of access, social inclusion and mental health promotion in the arts.

Standard 3.2

Strategic alliances are formed with a range of non-arts organisations to maximise access, social inclusion and mental health promotion.

Standard 3.3

The organisation helps to build the capacity of the arts sector to promote social inclusion and mental health.

VicHealth has a long interest in supporting organisational partnerships as a way of embedding the promotion of mental health and wellbeing in the centre of Australian life. Building partnerships not only increases the spread of the ideas, but also acknowledges that organisations have diverse expertise.

As one administrator put it: 'We are an arts organisation, not a social welfare agency'. So, agencies whose primary functions include targeting marginalised individuals and populations can be productive partners because they bring skills that are often not found in arts organisations.

Partnerships work best when:

- Each organisation has a good understanding of the promotion of mental health and wellbeing.
- There is clear synergy between each organisation's core business.
- All parties are willing to fine-tune or make changes to existing work practices.
- The partners are willing and able to share the workload. This may require organisations to give up, as well as take on, extra work.

VicHealth provides various supports for the development and pursuit of partnerships.¹⁷

Activity #6

Complete *The Partnership Analysis Tool* from VicHealth (Footnote 17).

Redefining a partnership so there is something in it for all the partners is a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to find the best way of influencing other organisations in terms of mental health and wellbeing without losing sight of the core business of engaging people in the arts. The opportunity, though, is that there needs to be a recognition that the arts have intrinsic value; and they also have *added* value in terms of the community's wellbeing.

KEY POINTS

- 1 The arts have extrinsic as well as intrinsic benefits for the community.
- 2 The extrinsic benefits include contributing to the mental health and wellbeing of individuals and the community through:
 - Advertising.
 - Positioning the organisation.
 - Establishing a supportive environment through programming, and providing a range of opportunities for people to become involved.
 - Forming strategic partnerships with non-arts organisations.
- 3 It is important to form partnerships where there are clear needs and obvious synergies.
- 4 Partner organisations bring expertise in identifying, engaging and working with marginalised groups.
- 5 Effective partnerships share responsibility for the partnership and the promotion of mental health and wellbeing.

¹⁷ VicHealth 2002, *The Partnership Analysis Tool*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne. Available at: <<http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Content.aspx?topicID=239>>.

The Experience of Geelong Performing Arts Centre (GPAC)

GPAC concentrates on promoting access and its relationship with mental health and wellbeing for patrons who traditionally do not attend arts events. This occurs, in part, through partnerships with organisations that focus directly on marginalised members of the community.

For example, GPAC has also begun to redefine its relationship with major sponsors. These corporate organisations are prepared to give money, but they are also looking for a more articulated community benefit.

Alcoa, who is the major sponsor for 2006, has run a series of posters under the heading *Partnering stronger communities*. Each poster has a theme and a short description. One, entitled *Arts for life*, states:

Alcoa at Port Henry partners organisations that provide access to arts and cultural activities for the whole community.

Other posters in the series use the following subheadings:

- Sustainable communities.
- Volunteer for life.
- Safe and healthy children and families.

The contribution the arts can make to wellbeing and mental health has been able to meet the challenge implicit within the sponsorship partnership with Alcoa.

It has incorporated terms such as mental health, community wellbeing, social inclusion and the value of diversity. It has been able to demonstrate how participation in the arts can contribute to these central ideas. Language is important here because it defines the territory in highly specific terms. These terms can then be used to persuade stakeholders who do not come from the arts of some of the benefits participation brings. The philosophy of mental health promotion provides the rationale for why a corporation should sponsor GPAC.

Some other partnerships have been a little easier to conceptualise, even though the workload has been greater. Over a number of years, GPAC has looked to form strategic partnerships with a range of local community and welfare agencies. These have included Bethany Family Services, the Victorian AIDS Council, CREATE and the BAYSA youth services.

The partnerships took different forms, even though they were based on a common commitment to engage with community and strengthen individuals' involvement in the arts.

GPAC's commitment to partnerships is demonstrated by the prominence the issue received in its 2005 annual report:

[GPAC has formed] ... partnerships with a broad range of non-arts organisations that included, local councils, leading community support organisations and training providers ... [This enabled] ... individuals who might otherwise not have access to GPAC due to barriers such as being socially or geographically isolated or [coming] from low socio-economic backgrounds [to] access our programs and events throughout 2004-05.

One of the strong successes of GPAC developing and maintaining partnerships is an acknowledgment that each partner brings considerable expertise to the table. GPAC puts on shows; it is not an expert in providing family, welfare or youth services. The skill GPAC has is to be imaginative about how potential partners can contribute, with some small modifications, to its current program. GPAC sees itself as a catalyst for change.

For example, GPAC targeted its *Musical mornings* program. This was a fairly traditional part of the program that focused on older, retired people. Performances were scheduled during the day. In 2003, the targeting was narrowed to older *socially isolated* people in the shires surrounding Geelong.

A partnership was formed between GPAC, the Surf Coast Shire and service clubs. The shire's 'meals-on wheels' staff identified socially isolated people, and the shire purchased the tickets for these people and provided buses. Service club volunteers drove the buses to the performing arts centre. GPAC paid for the petrol and made available a low-cost lunch for the audience through its café. The shire's cultural development officer was a strong part of the shire's involvement.

The service clubs were happy to be involved because part of their mission was to encourage participation by older members in community events. The café on the GPAC site was delighted to be involved because it was guaranteed full patronage for lunch. GPAC was the catalyst for the program but it did not have to do all the work. It had to come up with the idea, find appropriate partners and put in some money when needed. As a senior administrator said: 'For the price of a tank of petrol, we are able to put on another performance of *Musical mornings*'.

The participants were pleased because they were involved in a regular social outing, and there was strong evidence that new friendships were forged through participation, and some of these continued outside attendance at the show.

Musical mornings is now sponsored by the Senior's Card. Throughout GPAC's involvement, there was an important transference of power and responsibility. While GPAC initiated the partnership, it was not solely responsible for its maintenance. It embraced the fact that the partners had greater expertise in targeting marginalised groups and overcoming the barriers that these people had to participation.

However, partnerships can be a double-edged sword. All partner organisations have their own agenda in terms of what they are trying to achieve. There needs to be some obvious synergy between the partners *and* the core commitments of VicHealth. In most cases, the major synergy is quite obvious: increasing access means more audience members. Arts organisations are constantly looking for ways to develop their audience. The challenge is to find other synergies, such as public perceptions of the organisation and its contribution to community, which can enhance the position of the arts.

Arts organisations find it a little more difficult to become involved in, and actively contribute to, community debates on the importance of access, social inclusion and mental health promotion. This is often seen as outside their core business; however, it does not need to be. As argued, community strengthening through social inclusion and valuing diversity has considerable currency among non-arts organisations. The arts can make a strong contribution by providing a language to describe their work that can be backed up by examples.

Press releases can be an opportunity to get the central message to the whole community. For example, GPAC released a statement regarding its naming rights sponsor which aid in part:

Alcoa Point Henry Smelter Operations Manager, Dr Jenny Purdie, said Alcoa was extremely pleased to be the naming rights sponsor for GPAC's 2006 theatre season. 'Alcoa is committed to partnering with stronger communities and organisations that build community capacity,' Dr Purdie said. 'GPAC has a proud history of providing an arts experience that is accessible to the whole of the community and we look forward to building on our existing partnership with GPAC to include the 2006 theatre season,' she added.

The ideas of *stronger communities and community capacity* are important signposts to GPAC's commitment to the promotion of mental health and wellbeing.

Of course, there are more direct ways of influencing public debates on how the arts can promote mental health and wellbeing. GPAC, for example, looked at its programs and one of the plays dealt with community conferencing. GPAC approached Bethany Family Services and ran a joint open seminar on the issues that were addressed in the play. This was an excellent opportunity to build on the program and explore some of the issues regarding mental health, community wellbeing and a sense of safety.

As part of Mental Health Week, GPAC initiated a forum entitled *Healthy arts = healthy minds*. GPAC's general manager gave the keynote address and other people on the discussion panel included representatives from VicHealth, mental health advocacy groups, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Two hundred people attended. The forum included questions and comments from the audience, and GPAC found discussion occurred between audience members as well. The seminar concluded with community singing.

GPAC also works with organisations that deal with people who are mentally ill or those for whom early intervention is appropriate. GPAC has become a powerful voice for mental *health* and illness prevention.

GPAC is opportunistic about influencing public debates on mental health promotion and community wellbeing. The question always in the back of its mind is: How can we add value to what we are currently doing?

This requires some imagination and good working relationships with other agencies. For example, the service agency CREATE ran a program with people who were completing a certificate in aged care. Often these were women who were long-term unemployed or who had been out of the workforce for many years. They became part of the front of house team for *Musical mornings*. This not only provided more staff for the program, but it also brought specialist skills. As one of the regular staff said: 'It made us more relaxed, just knowing there were people available who could deal with a fall or some other situation'.

The people from CREATE were able to be involved in the arts, contribute to the work of GPAC and work with their peers. The environment was supportive and placed these women in positions that emphasised their strengths rather than highlighting their weaknesses. The work the CREATE clients undertook was real in the sense that someone else would have needed to have done it if they hadn't. Many CREATE people had never been in a position where they had skills and expertise upon which other people relied. GPAC is a complex institution that provides a range of opportunities if approached imaginatively.

Volunteering is seen as a universal good. It is used extensively by GPAC and is seen as a powerful way of engaging a range of people in GPAC's work. It is also used opportunistically as a forum to advocate for the role the arts can play in promoting mental health and wellbeing. Part of the orientation volunteers receive is a detailed explanation of the rationale that underpins GPAC's emphasis on community partnerships, the fostering of an inclusive local identity, and the engagement of marginalised groups. External people understood *what* GPAC did; they now have a better understanding of *why* they do it.

The major sponsor provides its employees with one volunteering day per year. A number of people have taken on the role of marshals at the Poppy Kettle Festival, which is a major arts celebration for young children and their parents. The volunteers have enjoyed their experiences so much that they tend to come back year after year.

The final standard deals with the organisation helping build the capacity of the arts sector to promote social inclusion and mental health. GPAC (with the other two organisations featured in this publication) occupies a leadership role within the sector. For example, GPAC's general manager was a past president of the Association of Performing Arts Centres. She was able to influence their conference that was appropriately entitled: *Arts centres are community leaders rather than passive venues*.

Throughout the schemes, many senior staff from all of the funded organisations were on the boards of other agencies, or dealt with people on a regular basis who worked within or with other arts companies. Their involvement provided the opportunity to raise questions about the contribution the arts make to health, social inclusion and the representation of diversity. The influence of the sector was often serendipitous and opportunistic. However, it did rely on having an appropriate language and rationale to explain concepts that are not immediately apparent to arts practitioners.

As mentioned above, the three organisations highlighted here did much more in terms of access and participation than is mentioned here. The examples have been used to suggest a range of approaches that have been successful. The challenge for arts organisations is to promote mental health and wellbeing 'as a matter of course'. Health promotion in arts organisations and a commitment to access are orientations that should mesh with current good work that is being undertaken.

Making a start

The following are some pointers on how to get started in turning your arts organisation into one that promotes mental health and wellbeing.

- 1 Gather a small group of staff and volunteers who will become the 'drivers of change'. It will be important to involve at least one senior staff member. Junior members of staff or volunteers find it extremely difficult to effect change because they seldom have the authority to alter the organisation in terms of its structures, programs or partnerships.¹⁸
- 2 Build the expertise of this core committee in terms of using the arts to promote mental health and wellbeing. This publication and VicHealth's *Plan for action 2005—2007* are good places to start. The rationale of *why* there is an emphasis on health promotion is important and needs to be addressed.
- 3 Introduce the central concepts to the board, other staff and key volunteers. As a way of building commitment to the central concepts of mental health promotion, complete activities 1 and 2.
- 4 Celebrate your current successes and look for realistic and achievable changes that could be made. In the beginning, plan and implement any changes modestly. It is better to have a few successes than being overwhelmed by a seemingly impossible task.

¹⁸ Organisations are not always receptive to changes, particularly if they are perceived as major. A useful checklist has been developed by Connolly, P & Cady MH, 2001, *Increasing cultural participation: an audience development planning handbook for presenters, producers and their collaborators*, The Unit for Contemporary Literature, Illinois State University, Ill, pp. 135–136. Available at: <<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/ArtsParticipation/IncreasingCulturalParticipation.htm>>.

Embedding mental health promotion in a sustainable way

1 Undertake Activity #3 with staff and volunteers. This could be done as a way of consolidating mental health promotion into the work of your organisation. The standards, though, could be revisited every three or four years to coincide with the organisation's planning cycle.

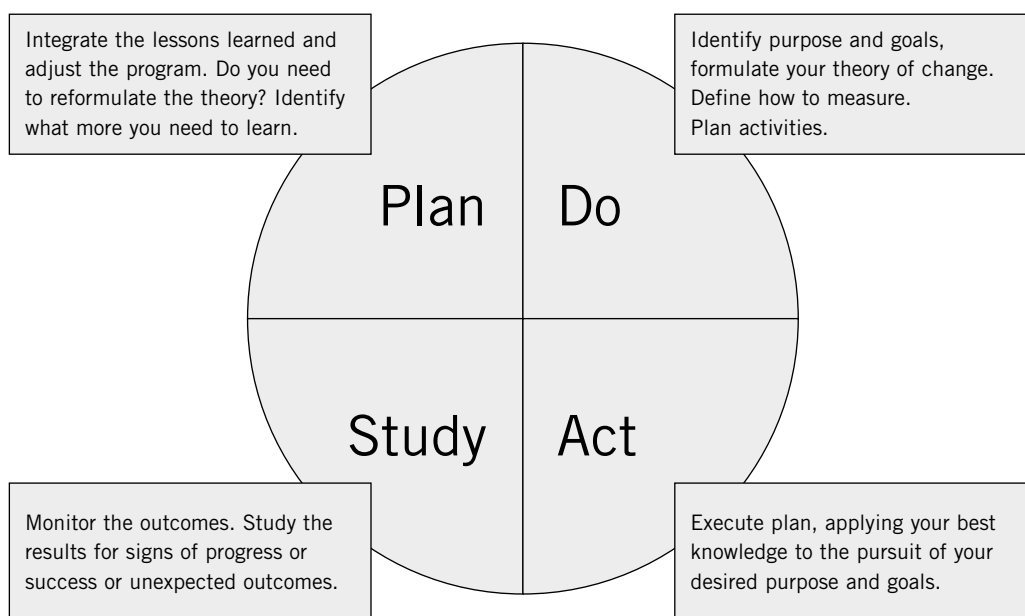
Complete Activity #4 as a means of supporting stakeholders as they look at what is currently done well and what could be improved.

2 Ensure policies and position descriptions mention the promotion of mental health and wellbeing, and that it is seen as part of your organisation's core business.

3 Review your progress regularly and fine-tune the approaches to increasing access to your work by marginalised people. Sometimes, more radical and ambitious changes need to be tried. Use VicHealth's *Planning, monitoring and evaluating mental health promotion*.


4 Introduce a culture of continuous quality improvement (CQI) across the organisation. This should include, but not necessarily be confined to, the promotion of mental health and wellbeing.¹⁹

CQI is a way of continually looking for changes that will lead to improvements in the organisation and the programs it runs. It focuses on the people who use the organisation including audiences and participants. It seeks to involve all employees who work together using external data and their practical knowledge to improve what the organisation does and how it operates. Typically CQI follows a cycle²⁰:



19 See: van Maris, B 2002, *A continuous quality improvement approach to evaluation*, Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto, Toronto. Available at: http://www.thcu.ca/infoandresources/evaluation_resources.htm

20 The following diagram is adapted from Barbara van Maris's work.



The value of CQI is that it can start small and develop into a very sophisticated way of working where everyone in the organisation is looking for improvements in their work (particularly in terms of making the organisation more accessible to marginalised populations).

When CQI is introduced, four key questions need to be asked of all staff involved:

- *What are we trying to accomplish?*
- *What changes can we make that will result in an improvement?*
- *How will we know that a change is an improvement?*
- *How can we embed the changes so they are part of everyday practice?*

There is value in having CQI as a standing item on the agenda of each staff meeting. Staff are able to identify where they are on the cycle and how they are progressing. It is also important to use VicHealth's various planning and monitoring instruments because these will keep the promotion of mental health and wellbeing prominent in people's minds. The more the concepts are explored and the language is used, the less health promotion is daunting or just an added task.





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