

Woven Stories: Thematic Summary

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The QUT research team acknowledge the First Nations owners of the lands on which this research took place: Iningai, Malintji, Kuungkari, Bidjara and Koa lands in Longreach, Barcaldine, Blackall, Tambo, Alpha, Jundah and Winton in central western Queensland.

Context

Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place –Australia’s Cultural Policy for the next five years (2023) emphasises the value of localised arts and cultural activities for enabling diverse communities “to tell their stories, evolve their own cultural identities and build local resilience (Commonwealth of Australia 2023, 40).

Between 8th and 12th April 2024, RAPAD in collaboration with researchers from Queensland University of Technology (QUT), facilitated focus groups and interviews in Longreach, Winton, Jundah, Alpha, Barcaldine and Tambo. Focus groups and interviews focused on gathering information about: what creativity looks like in central western Queensland towns; how creative activities connect community or create a sense belonging; how creativity sustains individuals and communities in difficult times; and the types of creative projects that have had lasting impact. See Appendix 1 for the full list of questions used in focus groups.

The following thematic summary provides an overview of research undertaken in collaboration with Central Western Queensland Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD). The purpose of the project is to uncover stories from central western Queensland about how engagement in arts, culture and creativity assist to develop resilience for both individual and whole of regional, rural and remote communities in response to drought and aligns with the Central West Regional Drought Resilience Plan.

In conducting this study, the research team has employed three positions arising from previous research undertaken in similar communities in central western Queensland. The Regional Arts and Social Impact study made three key findings that are applicable to this research (see Gattenhof et al. 2023, 15). These are expressed as:

1. Place as central to arts, culture and creativity in rural, regional and remote Australia

Mackay et al. (2021, 392) emphasise “place is everything for regional communities” and acknowledge that the characteristics of places profoundly shape experiences, behaviours and quality of life. Taking a place-based approach provides a means of unravelling the ways in which art, culture and creativity reflect, shape and enhance the lives of people in the communities, cities and towns where they live. It enables the multiplicity of arts practices and the creativity and culture of diverse communities to be illuminated, along with localised understandings and impacts in terms of how they make people feel, the ways they empower people and interact with place to foster legacy.

2. *Using arts, culture and creativity as a triad*

This research extends Gattenhof et al.'s (2022) position that expanding the frame of arts and culture to include the notion of creativity may break down perceived barriers of elitism ascribed to the term 'arts'. Expanding the frame of arts and culture to include creativity allows for the valuing and representation of culture and cultural practices that are place-based and inclusive of ritual, custom and storytelling. Rural, regional and remote Australian communities value creativity to preserve and innovate traditional crafts or heritage art practices. It is important to note that embracing traditional or heritage art practices are not solely anchored in the context of the past, but communities use their knowledge of place to realise outputs for Australian and international engagement and impact.

3. *Linking Creativity and Wellbeing*

Solutions to seemingly intractable problems, such as social isolation and low levels of wellbeing, already exist within communities. Local heritage, arts, culture and creativity are powerful assets and tools for rural, regional, and remote Australian communities, to deliver impacts beyond the traditional measures of economics, tourism and trade. The ways in which art-based and community-led approaches can positively impact collective wellbeing, and particularly social cohesion, have gained widespread recognition. Fancourt and Finn (2019) acknowledge the capacity for intentional and targeted arts activities to uncover solutions and approaches to health and wellbeing challenges. This is consistent with other projects and work being undertaken by RAPAD and CW local governments connecting social determinants with health and wellbeing such as the findings in the RAPAD Health Report, the Healthy Outback Communities project and role as trial Integrated Care and Commissioning region. This project acknowledges the need for community-led perspectives and frameworks for developing arts-led, cross-sector approaches to enhancing wellbeing.

This analysis is a top-level summary of the commonalities that arose from what communities shared in focus groups. However, this summary does not seek to collapse responses from communities into a singular view. Within the summary, the research team recognises the differences and unique capacities of each community and therefore not all summary statements can be viewed as being representative of all communities included in this research. The analysis does not contain data from individual interviews. The data from the interviews will be aggregated with the focus group data in further summaries that will be available late June/early July 2024.

All photographs in this document are credited to Bryan Crawford, Longbow Productions.



Key Themes

Strengths

People

The people that made up the community were a key source of pride, with community members often citing creative attitudes and dedicated volunteering as key attributes.

Place

Each community had pride in the unique landscape features, amenities and history of their local area. Significant places were often a source of inspiration for creative activity or provided a physical space for activity. In particular, the repurposing of existing built environments for creative activity was a source of pride for many communities. The Corfield and Fitzmaurice building in Winton and the Bushman's Gallery in Blackall are examples of this kind of repurposing. Similarly, town beautification through public art visible at the entrance or exit of a town and in the main street was a source of pride for many communities.

Wellbeing and Social Connection

There was broad community awareness of the positive role that arts, culture and creativity play in supporting the wellbeing of individuals and fostering social connections in community.

Economic

Communities valued investment in arts and creativity due to the economic support for individuals and families that arts and creativity provide.

Challenges

People

Although many communities took pride in the creative attitudes and dedicated volunteering of individuals, supporting and maintaining active and inclusive volunteers remains a challenge. Communities with smaller populations felt this challenge was particularly acute and often expressed the need for returning to creative events that had since been lost. In addition, engaging men in creative activity was a challenge experienced by all communities and it must be acknowledged that a large proportion of the participants in this phase of the research were women. Young people were also underrepresented.

Place

Distance and isolation presented key challenges for many of the communities in maintaining thriving creative communities. While many communities had positive experiences with visiting arts practitioners coming to their community, this model of creative activity also presents a challenge as it is not always accepted positively by the community in the same way that activities for and by the community are, particularly in relation to the lasting impact for communities and individuals. Finally, for communities that did not have public art such as Jundah, lack of town beautification through creative works was cited as a key challenge.

Wellbeing and Social Connection

Communications about arts, culture and creative programs, activities and events are inconsistent within communities and ineffective across communities. This results in potential audiences/participants not being reached and for impact of engagement to be reduced.

Economic

Related to the challenge of maintaining active and inclusive volunteer bases, many communities expressed the need for support to apply for funding for creative activity.

Opportunities

Across Communities

There is opportunity to develop a shared arts, culture and creative strategy to embrace all central western Queensland activated through local government authorities. Taking a whole of region approach may result in grant pools of funding, help situate an enhanced shared vision of the centrality of arts, culture and creativity in connection to wellbeing and strengthen the articulation unique features in both towns and whole of region in relation to heritage arts practices and utilisation of landscape in the delivery of events.

People

Communities require a considered strategy to recruit in new volunteers, including mentorship from more experienced volunteers to maintain the volunteer base within organisations and exploring new ways of working within groups. An opportunity exists to utilise existing skills and expertise from within the region to support communities, including to provide workshops, instead of looking outside and beyond. The Australian Rural Leadership Foundation, in association with RAPAD, are providing two 'Changemaker' leadership workshops within the region as part this project's funding, which may help support an arts and creativity community of interest and stronger regional, community driven creativity leadership.

Place

There is opportunity to expand the repurposing of spaces for creative activity and for a whole of central west strategy to enable all communities to build identity through public art.

Wellbeing and Social Connection

Events that connected neighbouring communities were highly valued e.g. Channel Country Ladies Day. There is scope to expand support for such events.

Economic

There is an opportunity to provide regional support to volunteer groups seeking to apply for funding. Additionally, opportunities exist to develop cross town connections and tourist trails (e.g. Winton bolder opal with Jundah galaxy opal) for enhanced economic outcomes.

References

Commonwealth of Australia. (2023). *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place – Australia's Cultural Policy for the next five years.*

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Appendix 1 – Focus Group Questions

1. What does creativity look like in your community?
2. What feeling do you get from engaging in creative activity?
3. How does this creativity sustain you and your community in difficult times?
4. What are you most proud of in your community?
5. How would you describe the challenges faced by your community?
6. What are the community spaces and places that are important to you?
7. What current or past activities occur that strengthen, connect this community or created a sense belonging?
8. What was it about these activities that were so memorable?
9. How does the sense of belonging and connection continue outside these activities?
10. What are your ambitions and hopes for your community in the next five years?