

Marion – A City of Synergies

See: <http://www.marion.sa.gov.au/index.htm>

Marion lies about 12 kilometres south west of down town Adelaide

Statistical overview

In the 2001 Census there were three Statistical Local Areas covering Marion. Approximately 28 per cent of Marion's population used the Internet at home and 38 per cent from any site during Census week. Internet use in Marion, both at home and from any site, was a few percentage points higher than for South Australia as a

Internet use in Marion, 2001 Census			
	Total Population	Internet use	
		At home	From Any Site
Marion - Central	31,706	26%	36%
Marion – North	24,606	23%	33%
Marion – South	19,466	38%	48%
Marion Total	75,778	28%	38%
Adelaide	1,072,476	28%	38%
South Australia	1,467,283	26%	35%

whole and exactly the same as for all Adelaide. However, South Marion had significantly higher levels of Internet use at home and from any site than did Adelaide or South Australia. Marion's population profile was also similar to Adelaide's.

Background

Marion has several features that have made it a hot spot, not just for Internet connectivity, but for visitors interested in libraries, lifelong learning, and community learning programs. This community story is about the intersection of those elements in Marion. The pride of community members as they spoke about their projects is a strong indicator that something very positive is happening.

Learning to learn

Marion Council has consistently sought to be a smart city, by being alert to opportunities and encouraging community participation in planning. There has long been a mind set within Council that is open to suggestions and willing to approach problem solving in new ways. Without one particular dominant resource, industry or attraction to rely on, Marion has realised that its future depends on the community skill base that underpins their human and social capital. Often, but not always, these skills involve new media and technology.

The Learning Festival, now entering its third year, is probably the most obvious element in creating Marion's positive local energy. It grew out of a meeting Council facilitated to explore how to better develop the community's social capital. It is the only festival of its kind in Australia. The main venue for the event is the main mall of Westfield Marion. This is South Australia's largest shopping centre, with approximately 260,000 people passing through each week. It is a logical place to take the learning to the people, with a range of free 'taster courses' provided by around 140 organisations at the mall and other venues.

In 2003 nearly 500 people sampled learning, and groups such as the Seniors-On-Line increased their enrolments as a result. Liverpool Council (NSW) also has a Westfield shopping centre, and sent an observer this year to the Learning Festival to see if the model can work in the Sydney metro area. Westfield has been enthusiastic about the Festival as an opportunity to demonstrate good corporate citizenship.

The [South Australian Centre for Lifelong Learning and Development](http://www.centreforlifelonglearning.org.au)¹, funded by the Premier's Department, is a key driver of the Learning Festival. The Centre is located centrally in Marion, close to Flinders University and the Flinders Medical Centre, but also close to the community. This makes it more accessible. The Centre acts as a broker and facilitator for learning. They do not just suggest courses and hand over a leaflet, but also do additional background research to help find the right learning opportunity to match an inquiry. In this way, it becomes easier for people to make the next step of a phone call or a visit.

The Centre identifies and works to ease the barriers to learning, both formal and informal. Their philosophy is one of social inclusion and encouraging the learners to take control, and they see evidence that 'learning to learn' can become a life long habit with productive outcomes for local development. Although based in Marion, the Centre's role is state-wide, and their Director, Professor Denis Ralph, has a number of success stories of rural towns achieving greater economic resilience as a result of this very open and strategic approach to learning.

These activities are of course assisted by information technology and the Internet, as tools rather than an end goal. The Centre's research and consultancy activities are supported by collaboration with nine PhD students and 50 student bursaries that target specific groups, including isolated, young and Aboriginal students.

Not Just for Kids

The [Seniors-On-Line](http://www.sol.asn.au)² (SOL) organisation is the second synergy that is very evident in Marion. Conveniently located in the same building as the Centre for Lifelong Learning and Development, SOL has become a powerful engine for developing social capital. The aim is to help older people, traditionally low adopters of new media, to access information technology. The majority of the participants are between the ages of 58 and 74 years, with the oldest member 'graduating' at age 91.

Special 'one off' classes have been held for non-English speaking groups including Italian and Vietnamese. Classes of hearing impaired students have also participated using a 'signer' to assist. While these present special challenges, they suggest that even the most difficult 'digital divide' groups may benefit as the online community reaches critical mass.

Many seniors who have completed their classes come back to teach others, and SOL currently has 116 volunteer helpers. Others use their new skills to help with the administration and management of other community groups. In this way, social capital keeps building. Some of the volunteers are retired teachers or engineers, and there are always four experienced helpers moving around the room to assist during classes.

Over 3 000 seniors have completed the computing courses since 1994. They can start with word processing and move on to the Internet and email, spreadsheets and databases. Some then purchase their own home computers, perhaps to make the online world part of their daily lives. Learning from peers and having a regular practice session on Friday mornings have helped SOL to thrive long-term. The Centre for Lifelong Learning and Development has also assisted, for example by helping them put forward proposals for necessary resources. These efforts have provided a social capital return on investment, as SOL has now helped to start similar groups in the

¹ <http://www.centreforlifelonglearning.org.au>

² <http://www.sol.asn.au>

rural and regional areas of South Australia by running several ‘Train the Trainer’ sessions for seniors in these areas.

SOL is self-sustaining, thanks to their volunteer support, including President Sirkka Duncan. They also have access to the Flinders University network, which helps with their overhead costs. They are able to charge just \$5/hr, or \$80 for a 16-hour course, and they are booked out for months in advance. The ever-worrying problem of computing support at home is partly addressed by a strong ongoing relationship with their computer supplier, who is generous with support for SOL members.

A New Age Library

The Marion Library system is the third element of this positive synergy. It is also the result of careful planning that reached out to discover what the community wanted. Before they built their third branch, they did a lot of research to find out how successful libraries were positioning themselves. They were prepared to do things differently, to set aside their own assumptions about what a library looks like and what its role is. They took tips from modern bookstores and retail spaces. Perhaps most importantly, they held a series of ‘passion cafes’. The public was invited to these events, which featured lunch, with butcher paper for tablecloths. Facilitators encouraged participants to write down what they wanted in the new library. As well as being a lot of fun, these sessions gave the planners a clear picture of user needs - light and airy, fun, multi-purpose and friendly.

The [Cultural Centre](#)³ is the result. As well as a library, it features a cafe, art gallery, performance space and theatre, and meeting rooms. In just 12 months it has become a focus for a range of community activities. The atmosphere is active and friendly with spacious seating arrangements allowing small groups to sit around terminals. The bustling and vigour evident in the library reflects staff with an online attitude, while the layout and design acknowledge that for many people computing is a social activity.

There have been book launches with nationally known authors, and publishers now seek out Marion because they know the Cultural Centre can draw a good crowd and publicity. Over 1400 people per day come through the library and there are 600 new borrowers per month. The main group of new users is 18-29 year olds who are usually shy of libraries. No wonder state librarians from around the country go out of their way to visit there. Other indicators of success are the vigorous Friends of the Library group, with over 200 members, and the book discussion meetings and email newsletter, as well as the Privilege Card that gives advance notice of events and access to the popular Toy Library. The Toy Library started with items to enhance learning and coordination and has now expanded into family friendly games, electronic books and products to assist rehabilitation.

Access from home to the online catalogue is proving immensely popular, with many requests for assistance now coming in via email. Staff planning includes catering to this growing group of remote users. The selection of full text databases has deliberately been oriented towards general non-academic users, who are researching topics useful to the community such as tourism, medicine and environmental management. The library is also hosting regular classes from several schools, where students can experience a different aspect of ‘library as life’.

³ <http://www.marion.sa.gov.au/Web/webmar.nsf/Lookup/Cultural+Centre>

As might be expected, the library has been supportive of SOL and has also been closely involved with the Centre for Lifelong Learning and Development. They are now involved in the Adelaide Fringe Festival, and with the Ngapartji Multi Media Centre. The library displays local digital art on multimedia screens, some of it locally produced.

An Holistic Result

Taken together, one can see many outcomes from the Learning Festival and Centre, the Seniors-On-Line and a library that has successfully positioned itself as a central institution for a community that is learning how to learn.

The high uptake of Internet connectivity has provided opportunities for Council to rebuild its website to offer more web-enabled services including bill payments, community feedback forms, access to contracts and tenders, online building applications and even lists of impounded dogs (complete with photos). Council officers noted that this is part of the network of opportunities that now connects the community and allows knowledge to flow in new ways. The Council has a 'triple bottom line' approach to sustainability, realising that social and environmental benefits are co-determiners of economic results. All three are necessary for Marion's future.

Another feature of Marion's Council is the [neighbourhood networks](#)⁴. The first started about nine years ago in South Ward, where a developing area had particular issues that needed to be addressed in the planning process. There are quarterly meetings, usually with a 'hot topic' for discussion and often a guest speaker. There are opportunities for community groups to also give a brief presentation about their organisation, any issues they are currently facing and/or any information or events that they would like to share with the Network. A running list of issues is maintained on the council web site, with information about how it is progressing and who is responsible. Attendance is open to all residents' groups, community groups, sporting and educational bodies and individual members of the community as well as Council representatives from the South Ward of the City. A more recent network covers the whole city, and this has a different feel to it. The networks are part of a complimentary online/offline culture. The City Strategic Planning Officer describes the approach to learning as now part of a life style. The computers in the four community centres help to blend in this relaxed but pervasive learning culture.

The positive energies and outcomes evident in Marion seem to be a product of fertile connections between groups eager to learn, explore new models and use technology to further their ends. Some aspects of the Marion synergies such as the Seniors-On-Line and the South Ward Neighbourhood Network have been long established. Other dimensions, such as the Learning Festival and Cultural Centre, are newer and the possible additional synergies are unpredictable. Connectivity to the Internet in Marion is above average but continually increasing. This is a city worth watching.

⁴ <http://www.marion.sa.gov.au/Web%5Cwebmar.nsf/Lookup/Neighbourhood+Network>