

## Australian rural libraries a model of engagement

*Australian rural libraries are leading the way in community engagement, according to Victoria University research.*

Victoria University's School of Social Sciences and Psychology PhD researcher Roziya Abu is investigating how libraries engage with their communities to identify improvements for rural public libraries in Malaysia.

"Rural libraries in Australia are much more than books on shelves and really act as community hubs," Roziya said. "Through the ever-changing range of cultural resources on offer they have become a social and cultural institution."

Story reading sessions for children, book clubs, homework assistance, and other activities for teenagers, as well as visiting authors and local history talks were all examples of relevant programs in Australian libraries that were absent from Malaysian rural public libraries.

In Malaysian rural public libraries there is an abundance of tension and frustration at the lack of suitable programs and the same old outdated books meaning rural libraries remained underutilised in Malaysia.

"Rather than acting as community and social development centres for people of all ages, rural Malaysian libraries are being used almost exclusively by school students," Roziya said.

"Their potential to act as a community development hub is not being tapped because the community is not involved in deciding what programs are offered."

Roziya believes it is important to engage Malaysia's largely rural population in public libraries to help improve their situation and not get left behind.

She said the Malaysian rural public libraries needed to move their focus away from school students to provide the range of community services similar to those in Australia.

"In many developing countries a literacy campaign is incomplete, and will falter, without the backdrop of an effective public library service to develop and carry on from where the school leaves off," she said.

The Malaysian government is trying to expand rural library services and going to remarkable levels to engage readers with many alternative programs such as door-to-door programs.

The study, titled *The role of the rural public library in community development and empowerment* will help focus efforts on issues of service relevance. Preliminary findings were recently published in the *International Journal of the Book*.



TREASURES REVEALED: NSW STATE LIBRARIAN, ALEX BYRNE (SECOND LEFT) SHOWS OFF THE STATE LIBRARY'S NEWEST AND MOST EXPENSIVE ACQUISITION

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