

Hub reflects the ebb and flow of the information age



St Hilliers project manager Ryan Canning with Balonne mayor Samantha O'Toole and Maranoa MP David Littleproud in the traditional library section of the \$6m Hub.

MARCH 16, 2022

SOME HAVE suggested libraries belong to a bygone age, when so many derive most of their information from phone-computers that fit into pockets. But few could claim the new \$6m development in the main street, called The Hub, is staid and musty.

The books displayed in a series of shelves in the main hall, with its curving glass walls, look like decorations or artefacts. However, they're just a fraction of the physical resources that can be ordered from the state library in Brisbane.

At one end is the space for the under sixes, seemingly more playground than a spot for the First Five Forever introduction-to-literacy program. A projector attached to the ceiling points to a patch of carpet for games such as Paint Bugs.

A table-sized computer called an interactive hub offers similar experiences for the adults. Visitors



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can get an idea of the shire's attractions by touching place names on a map of the shire, which conjures up photos.

The maker-space innovation lab is equipped with a large-format HP Designjet T2600 printer for screen printing and banners. A 3D printer buzzes away, creating a model of Disneyland in three-and-a-half hours.

At the western end, facing Victoria street, are reading, study and computer rooms, with a kitchenette that can be closed to the rest of the library after hours. That's when they become the preserve of tertiary students mentored by the country universities centre, aka CUC Balonne.

On the other side of a meandering space comprising paths and garden beds are a canteen and two meeting rooms, adjoining the old town hall. Even the street lights are more than they seem, with wifi relays and security cameras. Library staff have doubled to four.

"Our library is more than just a library," said Balonne mayor Samantha O'Toole, before the complex was opened by Maranoa MP David Littleproud on Monday 7 March. "It's obviously a contemporary library and is where they're heading into the future. We spent a lot of time navel gazing and talking about where libraries are going to be in 10-15 years. I think the library we built reflects that, with all the technology and access to different things that kids require now. It's more than just books."



CUC Balonne manager Alix Greenhill with assistant Paige Hoolahan and student Lucy Sevil.

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Sam said more than 600 people had been through the building since its soft opening on 5 February. “We’ve had some really positive feedback to the librarians and those taking tours through. I think we even convinced a few of the hecklers and non-believers that the facility is state-of-the-art and contemporary. It’s amazing for a rural community to have access to a facility such as this. It’s not just something you see in Toowoomba or the big smoke.”


Designed by Fulton Trotter architects, the building’s concrete pillars replicate the columns of the Andrew Nixon bridge and weir that dams a section of the Balonne river beside the town. The curving walls and paths, and the colours evoke the shape and colours of the river, while the rooms are named after the shire’s major streams, including the Bokhara, Moonie, Culgoa, Wallam and Mungallala.



Libraries coordinator Melanie Mills and librarian Cheree Ryan pull up photos on the interactive hub.

The council tipped \$1m into the project, with the other \$5m from the federal government’s building better regions fund. Sam said building required 6000 worker hours, no injuries were recorded and about \$500,000 was spent locally on materials and living expenses.

She said the pilot CUC program, worth \$737,000 over three years, dovetailed perfectly with The Hub. With 40 students registered this semester,



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including 10 in Dirranbandi, the CUC is open from 5am to midnight. Centre manager Alix Greenhill said the students appreciated the quiet study areas and fast internet.

Wet weather and floods, covid restrictions, sharp increases in the cost of materials such as pressed metal and soupy substrate were the main challenges confronting builders St Hilliers. Project manager Ryan Canning said the number of oversized double-helix foundation piles had to be nearly tripled from 60 to 170 and were 6m deep.



Riversands winemaker David Blacket keeps the champagne flowing for David Lochel.

The thickness of the slab was increased from 120mm to 200mm, making it the equivalent of a suspended second-story slab. After breaking ground in May last year, the builders still managed to meet the deadline, despite losing 59 working days.

A plague in one of the gardens pays tribute to the council’s former community services manager Mareea Lochel, who was involved in The Hub’s planning and community consultation. She died two years ago of cancer, aged 45.

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