

Victoria's leading literary organisations housed in The Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas in Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to make a joint submission in response to the development of Australia's new National Cultural Policy.

We celebrate the achievements of Revive and congratulate the Federal Arts Minister and Government for recognising the significant role that the literature and creative industries play in Australian society. We welcome the policy framework established under Revive, and the creation of Writing Australia which will promote and support our sector at a critical time. In the next National Cultural Policy, we're calling on the Australian Government to invest in the health and sustainability of Australia's literary culture.

OUR CONTEXT

In 2008, Melbourne became the first Australian city and the second city in the world to be recognised as a UNESCO City of Literature, joining a global network of UNESCO Creative Cities. That designation was an acknowledgment of the breadth, depth and vibrancy of Melbourne's literary culture, a culture sustained by writers, readers, publishers, booksellers, and the organisations that bring them together.

This UNESCO City of Literature designation is maintained by Melbourne but should be celebrated and supported nationally. It is an ongoing commitment: to champion our national writing community as a public good, to share knowledge and practice across a global network of peer cities, and to hold ourselves to an ongoing standard of ambition for our sector. Melbourne accepted this responsibility in 2008, and every initiative, partnership and program that has followed has been shaped by it.

It is also worth reflecting on what this designation represents in 2026. The UNESCO Creative Cities Network is more competitive and more consequential than it was when Melbourne joined. Were we applying today, the question would not simply be whether Melbourne has a vibrant literary culture but whether our governments are investing in it at a level commensurate with that ambition. Whether our writers are supported. Whether our readers and audiences are growing. Whether the infrastructure that sustains literary life is being protected or quietly diminishing. A National Cultural Policy that rises to those questions would not only honor Melbourne's designation, it would also sustain its national significance.

The Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing & Ideas was established as a centrepiece of Melbourne's UNESCO City of Literature bid and has served as a hub and home for leading literary organisations ever since. Together, the Wheeler Centre and its resident organisations — Australian Poetry, Blak & Bright, Express Media, the Emerging Writers' Festival, the Melbourne Writers Festival, PEN Melbourne, and Writers Victoria — support over 2,000 artists, reach live and digital audiences of more than 50,000 and generate in excess of \$6 million in income for the literary sector.

From children to mature audiences, from emerging local writers to internationally renowned authors, and across metropolitan, outer-suburban and regional communities, the collective impact of these organisations is profound. Together they curate inclusively across all projects and programs to showcase literature from across Melbourne's many communities, lineages and identities, including First Nations, CALD, Deaf and disability, and LGBTQIA+ writers.

The Wheeler Centre brings together these literary organisations in the one building to exchange ideas, leverage collective strengths, and advocate around shared interests. To this end, we offer this joint submission on our collective response to the development of the new National Cultural Policy. We urge the policy to build on the five pillars of Revive with renewed ambition, sustainable funding, and a genuine commitment to literary culture as a necessity. Literature builds community and deepens public understanding and is one of the primary ways a society makes sense of itself, transmits its values across generations, and imagines alternative futures.

We welcome the opportunity to provide more information if required and extend an invitation to visit the Wheeler Centre to share ideas on bringing our collective ambitions to life.

SUBMISSION: NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

The following submission responds across the five pillars of the Revive policy framework — First Nations First; A Place for Every Story; The Centrality of the Artist; Strong Cultural Infrastructure; and Reaching the Audience — with focused recommendations under each.

We have highlighted areas where we believe the next policy should go further, and where specific changes or new commitments would make a material difference to the health and sustainability of Australia's literary culture.

FIRST NATIONS FIRST

The stories of First Nations peoples are the oldest living literary tradition on earth, and any credible cultural policy must place them at its centre — not as a footnote, not as a gesture toward inclusion, but as a foundational commitment grounded in sovereignty and in respect for Country.

Too often, First Nations cultural expression has been celebrated in public while being underfunded in practice. First Nations intellectual and cultural property has been reproduced, adapted without consent, or commercially exploited without the credit or compensation owed to its custodians. This must change.

Funding must be directed not only to individual First Nations writers but to the community and language custodian networks through which literary and cultural knowledge is held and transmitted. This means investment in First Nations-led publishing, in language revitalisation programs with a literary dimension, and in legal frameworks that give First Nations communities genuine control over their cultural heritage.

Aboriginal storytelling, literature, language and cultural practice must be recognised as irreplaceable public goods in their own right. We recommend the policy commit to long-term investment in dedicated First Nations cultural and literary spaces, including permanent infrastructure for Blak-led programming, as part of its cultural infrastructure commitments.

To address the historic and ongoing underfunding of Aboriginal-led initiatives, we recommend the introduction of a First Nations equity budget — a dedicated proportion of cultural investment allocated annually to Aboriginal-led organisations and programs, with transparent public reporting of outcomes.

First Nations voices must be recognised as sovereign and central, not subsumed within broader multicultural frameworks. Every reference to sustainability, creativity, liveability and innovation in this policy should explicitly acknowledge that these aspirations are grounded in Aboriginal knowledge systems, cultural practices and connection to Country.

- Before colonisation, more than 250 First Nations languages were spoken across Australia. Today, only 40 remain in use and just 12 are being learned by children. *ANU/University of Queensland, Nature Ecology and Evolution, 2022* <https://reporter.anu.edu.au/all-stories/1500-endangered-languages-at-high-risk>
- Australia spends just \$20.89 per capita of the Indigenous population on language support annually — compared to \$69.30 in Canada and \$296.44 in New Zealand. *ANU, 2022* <https://reporter.anu.edu.au/all-stories/1500-endangered-languages-at-high-risk>
- Indigenous languages make up only 2% of languages spoken worldwide but represent 9% of the world's critically endangered languages. *The Conversation, 2022* <https://theconversation.com/we-are-on-the-brink-of-losing-indigenous-languages-in-australia-could-schools-save-them-184736>

A PLACE FOR EVERY STORY

Australia's literary culture is only as strong as its diversity. The policy must invest in infrastructure that removes structural barriers to participation for writers from underrepresented backgrounds and extends the reach of literary organisations beyond metropolitan centres. Too much of Australia's literary life remains concentrated in a handful of major cities, and too many writers from regional, rural and remote communities — as well as from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds — face obstacles that have nothing to do with the quality of their work.

Australia's unique position bridging Western democratic values, Asia-Pacific geography, and rich Indigenous heritage makes it ideally placed to pioneer a bold new model of international cultural diplomacy. Rather than replicating the British Council or Alliance Française, an Australian International Cultural Organisation (AICO) could centre First Nations knowledge as a global intellectual contribution, foster genuine Indo-Pacific creative exchange, and position Australian ideas as soft-power bridges between the Global North and South.

This vision is not simply aspirational. Australia is already the natural literary and cultural bridge between the Western world and the Indo-Pacific, shaped by its geography, its history of migration, and its demographic composition. Yet policy has rarely reflected this potential. A new approach must actively foster translation, co-publication, residency exchange, and literary festival partnerships with Asia-Pacific neighbours, not as occasional goodwill gestures, but as a deliberate, sustained, and fully resourced strategic direction that places Australia at the centre of the region's cultural conversations.

- The Australia Council's *Creating Our Future* report found that artists outside capital cities earn significantly less from their practice and have access to fewer professional development opportunities, despite representing a substantial share of Australia's creative workforce.
- Approximately 29% of Australians live in regional or remote areas, yet arts funding and literary programming remains heavily concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne, leaving the majority of the country's geography significantly underserved.
- Australia has one of the largest Indo-Pacific diaspora populations in the world, with over 30% of residents born overseas — yet translation funding and co-publication programs with Asia-Pacific neighbours remain negligible compared to those of comparable nations.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE ARTIST

The challenges facing writers in Australia are not problems any single level of government can solve alone. Federal arts funding sets the national agenda, but state and territory governments shape the ecosystems in which writers actually live and work — through education policy, planning decisions, infrastructure investment, and direct arts funding. Local governments, meanwhile, are often the first point of contact between literary organisations and the communities they serve. A National Cultural Policy that operates in isolation from state, territory and local priorities will inevitably leave gaps — in regional coverage, in school-based programs, in the public spaces where literary culture takes root. We call on the federal government to establish a genuine, ongoing mechanism for coordinating cultural policy across all three levels of government, so that investment is complementary rather than duplicated, and so that writers in every part of the country benefit from a coherent, sustained public commitment to their work.

Writers are workers, and they are among the lowest-paid in the creative workforce. The median income of Australian writers from their writing alone sits well below the poverty line, forcing most to abandon sustained literary work in favor of survival employment. This is a structural problem, and policy must address it structurally.

We call on the government to remove the taxation of arts grants and literary prizes. These awards are not commercial income — they are recognition of creative labor and public investment in the development of Australian literary culture. To tax them is to claw back public support with one hand while offering it with the other, substantially eroding the real value of every grant and prize offered.

We call for the introduction of a Basic Income scheme for writers, modelled on Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts, which has demonstrated that even modest guaranteed income allows artists to dedicate real time to their craft. The returns on such an investment — in the depth, ambition and diversity of the work produced — would far exceed the cost.

The ability to travel for research, literary festivals, international residencies and global markets is currently available only to the already established or financially comfortable, limiting whose stories get written and where Australian literature is encountered in the world. Targeted mobility support would help correct this imbalance and extend the international reach of Australian literary culture.

The increased cost of studying literature, creative writing and the humanities at Australian universities directly threatens the pipeline of future writers, editors, publishers and literary professionals. When a literature or creative writing degree becomes a financial risk rather than a pathway, the cultural workforce narrows to those who can afford it. The long-term cost to the diversity and depth of Australian literary life will be substantial if this is not addressed.

Writers are among the most directly threatened by generative AI. Published work has been ingested into commercial AI systems without consent, credit or compensation, while AI-generated text is beginning to undercut markets for journalism, copywriting and commercial fiction. The policy must address training data rights, establish fair compensation frameworks, and make a clear commitment to the legal and cultural integrity of human authorship. To ignore it is to allow the systematic devaluation of the very creative output the policy exists to protect.

- 52% of Australian authors earned between \$0 and \$1,999 from their creative practice in the last financial year. An overwhelming 80% earned less than \$15,000 — including 55% of those who identified as full-time authors. *Australian Society of Authors, 2023 Survey*
<https://www.asauthors.org.au/news/2023-survey-results-author-earnings-remain-perilously-low/>
- Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts pilot (2022–2025) provided €325 per week to 2,000 artists. Evidence showed a consistent, positive impact across almost all indicators — including practice development, sectoral retention, wellbeing, and reduced deprivation. Artists in receipt of the support were typically able to devote more time to their art and produce more work. So successful was the pilot that Ireland has now made the program permanent. *Irish Government, Basic Income for the Arts Pilot Research Scheme*
<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-culture-communications-and-sport/publications/basic-income-for-the-arts-pilot-research-scheme-2022-2026/>

STRONG CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The Wheeler Centre and its resident organisations form a cornerstone of Australia's literary public life. All depend on sustained, multi-year core operational funding. Project-by-project funding models undermine the institutional continuity that allows literary culture to flourish across generations —

forcing organisations into perpetual short-term planning cycles, diverting staff time toward grant administration, and making it impossible to develop the long-term relationships and ambitions that produce the most significant cultural work. This must be replaced with sustained, long-term investment.

Independent bookshops are where literary risk is taken, where emerging writers are discovered and championed, and where no algorithm can substitute for the judgment of a knowledgeable bookseller. They are community anchors, cultural venues, and the primary point of contact between many readers and the wider literary world. As with small live music venues, their loss would be irreversible and devastating to the cultural fabric of our cities. Independent bookshops should be explicitly named within the definition of strong cultural infrastructure, and grant mechanisms should be developed that acknowledge their hybrid nature as simultaneously retail businesses and cultural venues.

School librarians are the most consistent professional advocates for literature in children's lives, yet their numbers have been systematically reduced across Australian schools over the past two decades. School librarians do not merely manage collections — they connect individual children to the specific books that will matter to them, introduce young readers to Australian writers, and build the habits of reading that sustain literary culture across a lifetime. Their restoration is essential infrastructure, not a luxury.

- Between 2010 and 2013, the number of teacher librarians in Australian primary schools dropped from 5,600 to just 1,300. *Australian Council for Education Research, 2014, cited in SCIS* <https://www.scisdata.com/connections/issue-98/the-importance-of-school-libraries-in-the-google-age/>
- A census of every South Australian school found fewer than one in four (23%) employed a qualified teacher librarian. Schools with qualified teacher librarians were more likely to show better NAPLAN literacy outcomes. *Concord, 2025* <https://concordinfiniti.com/literacy-and-teacher-librarians/>
- Australian public libraries recorded 88 million in-person visits in 2023–24, up 10% on the previous year — yet inflation-adjusted per capita funding has fallen by 12% over the past five years, and spending on library collections has dropped by 14% in real terms. *The Conversation / ALIA & NSLA Public Libraries Statistical Report 2023–24* <https://theconversation.com/australias-public-libraries-are-thriving-as-the-cost-of-living-rises-we-cant-afford-to-lose-them-267964>
- The number of bookstores in Australia declined by an average of 3.5% per year between 2018 and 2023, with bookstore revenue falling 6.3% to \$1.6 billion over the same period. *IBISWorld/INTHEBLACK, 2024* <https://intheblack.cpaaustralia.com.au/innovation/surprise-resurgence-australias-independent-bookstores>

REACHING THE AUDIENCE

Access to literature and ideas is a right, not a privilege — but that right means little without the foundation of literacy. Around 44% of Australians have low or very low literacy skills, and more than a quarter did not read or listen to a book last year. Among younger Australians, that figure rises to 28% — a seven-point drop since 2018 that should be treated as the cultural emergency it is. In a typical Australian classroom of 24 students, eight will struggle to read. These are not abstract statistics — they represent the audiences our organisations cannot yet reach, the stories that will never be told, and the writers who will never emerge.

A National Cultural Policy that does not treat literacy as a cultural issue as much as an educational one is incomplete. Investment in literary culture — in bookshops, in school librarians, in writers visiting schools, in accessible public libraries, in festivals and events that bring literature into community life — is itself an investment in literacy. A love of stories, nurtured early and sustained throughout life, is one of the most powerful literacy interventions available, and one of the least adequately resourced.

We urge the government to link cultural investment explicitly to national literacy goals, to treat the organisations that make literature accessible and alive as part of the literacy infrastructure of the nation, and to recognise that the audiences literary culture needs to build are also the citizens a literate democracy depends upon.

The removal of GST from books is one of the most direct and immediately impactful reforms available to government. In a country where 44% of adults already struggle with literacy, taxing books is a counterproductive policy that places a financial barrier between readers and the written word. Books are not luxury goods — they are educational tools, cultural artefacts, and one of the most cost-effective means of building the reading habits that sustain a literate society. The UK, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand have all recognised this by zero-rating books for consumption tax purposes. Australia remains an outlier. Removing GST from books would reduce the cost of reading for every Australian household, support independent booksellers operating on razor-thin margins, and send an unambiguous signal that this government treats access to literature as a public good rather than a discretionary purchase.

- Around 44% of Australian adults lack the literacy skills needed for everyday life — and experts note this figure is likely an undercount because remote communities are excluded from the data. *Adult Learning Australia, citing PIAAC data* <https://ala.asn.au/stories/australias-adult-literacy-crisis/>
- Between 2003 and 2022, Australian students' reading literacy fell by the equivalent of one and a half years of schooling. More than half of the most economically disadvantaged 15-year-olds are not proficient readers. *Productivity Commission, cited in Concord, 2025* <https://concordinfiniti.com/literacy-and-teacher-librarians/>
- Research by the Australian Publishers Association found that the introduction of GST in Canada led to a 25% fall in educational and academic book sales and a 10–20% cut in demand across the broader book sector — findings consistent with the impact of book taxes in the UK, Ireland and the USA. *Australian Parliament, ParlInfo*

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id:%22media/pressrel/2014HNC04056398%22> ParlInfo

- Only one quarter of parents from the lowest-income Australian households received advice that children should be read aloud to from birth, compared to nearly half across the broader population — evidence that access to reading culture is already deeply unequal, and that removing cost barriers to books would have the greatest proportional benefit for lower-income families. *Australia Reads, Key Statistics on Reading*
<https://australiareads.org.au/key-statistics-on-reading/>

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

First Nations First

- Grow dedicated funding for First Nations writers, storytellers and language custodians
- Legislate protections for First Nations cultural and intellectual property
- Invest in First Nations-led publishing and language revitalisation programs
- Establish a First Nations equity budget within cultural investment
- Ensure First Nations representation in the governance and leadership of literary organisations
- Require public reporting on how First Nations advisory guidance is acted upon

A Place for Every Story

- Remove structural barriers to participation for writers from underrepresented backgrounds
- Support regional literary programming
- Establishment of an Australian International Cultural Organisation (AICO)
- Actively foster translation, co-publication, residency exchange and festival partnerships with Asia-Pacific neighbors

The Centrality of the Artist

- A coordinated, collaborative approach to cultural policy in which all three levels of government work together on the National Cultural Policy and support for the sector
- Remove taxation on arts grants and literary prizes
- Introduce a Basic Income scheme for writers modelled on Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts
- Establish a Writer Mobility Support program
- Reverse the increased cost of humanities degrees to protect the future literary workforce
- Develop clear national guidelines around the use of AI in creative writing and the protection of copyright in literature
- Introduce copyright reform covering AI training data and enforceable remuneration for writers

Strong Cultural Infrastructure

- Replace project-by-project funding with sustained, multi-year core operational funding for literary organisations
- Formally recognise independent bookshops as essential cultural infrastructure
- Develop grant mechanisms suited to the hybrid retail-and-cultural nature of independent bookshops
- Mandated school librarians across Australian schools

Reaching the Audience

- Pursue a whole-of-government approach that opens grant pathways for literary and arts organisations through the Departments of Health and Education, recognising writing's broader social benefits beyond the cultural sector
- Link cultural investment explicitly to national literacy goals
- Treat literary organisations as part of the national literacy infrastructure
- Greater investment in national literacy initiatives, especially in socio-economic areas where literacy rates are lowest
- Address structural barriers to access including removing GST from books
- Specific support for organisations that program children's literary events, reading and literacy initiatives that promote reading for pleasure

ABOUT THE ORGANISATIONS IN THE WHEELER CENTRE

Australian Poetry (AP) is the peak national body for poetry in Australia. AP exists to support the full breadth of poetry produced in this country, representing Australian poetry and its poets nationally and internationally. A deep respect for First Nations Cultural Protocols underpins all that AP does in its publishing, commissioning and presenting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander poetry — central to AP's ongoing engagement with the oldest continuous poetic tradition in the world.

Blak & Bright is Australia's leading organisation dedicated to showcasing and elevating First Nations literary voices. Founded in 2016 around its flagship First Nations Literary Festival, Blak & Bright has established year-round programming partnering with like-minded organisations across Australia, celebrating the rich tapestry of First Nations writers across all genres.

The Emerging Writers' Festival (EWF) is one of Australia's most established literary festivals, developing, nurturing and promoting Australia's new writing talent and creating platforms for connecting writing communities and their audiences. EWF provides opportunities for emerging writers to develop

professionally and engage new and larger audiences — a place where creativity and innovation are celebrated and diverse voices from across Australia are represented.

Melbourne UNESCO City of Literature Office, launched in 2014, connects Melbourne to the UNESCO network and uses the benefits of its membership to aid the literary sector in Melbourne and across Victoria. Hosted by The Wheeler Centre and the State Library of Victoria, and a joint initiative of Creative Victoria and City of Melbourne, the Office facilitates a range of initiatives with collaboration and connection in mind.

Express Media has been developing, supporting and promoting young writers for over 35 years through workshops, publication opportunities, and awards that recognise excellence. Its flagship publication *Voiceworks* is made entirely by writers, editors and artists under the age of 25 and has been a cornerstone of Australian youth literary culture since the 1980s.

Melbourne Writers Festival brings writers and readers together to be inspired, challenged and thrilled by an intelligent, rousing and diverse program of books and ideas. Since 1986, the organisation has entertained hundreds of thousands of readers as Australia's boldest literary festival — where intellect, imagination and inquiry take the stage.

PEN International Melbourne Centre, founded in 1938 is one of 147 PEN International centres worldwide whose members are united by a commitment to the freedom to write and freedom to read. PEN brings writers together from across cultures and from the margins to share experiences and explore how literature reflects and shapes lives. PEN Melbourne focuses on women writers, First Nations writers, those in the Asia-Pacific region and actively campaigns on behalf of persecuted and silenced writers around the world.

The Wheeler Centre is Melbourne's home for smart, passionate and entertaining public talks, existing to support writers, readers and thinkers. Through live and digital conversations, debates, readings, performances and discussions, it deepens public engagement with the most pressing topics of the day, dedicated to creative collaboration, community engagement, diversity and innovation.

Writers Victoria is Victoria's first, largest and longest-running organisation for writers, with around 2,000 members throughout Victoria and beyond. Writers Victoria supports Victoria's vibrant storytelling community, ensures writers from all of Victoria's diverse communities have the skills and support to succeed, and advocates broadly for writers and storytellers.

Literature is how a nation talks to itself. Investment in the Wheeler Centre and its resident organisations is an investment in the quality of that conversation.