



WestWords

sharing the wealth of words

Western Sydney's literature development organisation

WestWords

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

Submission for new National Arts/Cultural Policy

WestWords is a highly successful literary organisation in Western Sydney which provides a model for other regions of Australia.

We see stories as being at the heart of our humanity. Stories tell us who we are, who we have been and who we may become. They do so for the individual, and also for the broader culture of the community and the nation.

Greater Western Sydney consists of 14 local government areas and is one of the most culturally diverse regions of Australia. It is home to over 2.5 million Australians, originating from 180 countries and speaking almost 100 different languages. It has one fifth of the population of Indigenous Australians and 60% of new immigrants to Australia settle in this region.

It is the third largest economic region of the country, behind the CBDs of Sydney and Melbourne.

WestWords began 15 years ago as a project of Blacktown City Council. It was started by writers and literature lovers who believed that Western Sydney was a region of the country where diverse stories were not being written. This population was largely unseen and unknown to the rest of the country.

WestWords

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At the same time, young people in this region rarely engaged with creators of story. Writers for young people were rarely encouraged to visit schools and libraries to present their work and encourage young people to learn from them.

WestWords began as a small project based organisation when the NSW Labor Premier, the Hon Nathan Rees, saw this lack of cultural support as a matter of equity. In 2015 it became an incorporated company to even better serve its constituency.

To create a broader vision, WestWords met with all stakeholders to determine collectively what institutions and activities were needed to build the cultural life of this diverse and vibrant region. The overwhelming need was for a Centre for Writing; a place which was both a 'home' for writers and a resource to foster the writing and reading activities for people of all ages.

The outcome has been better than we could have ever imagined. Currently WestWords is running 147 different activities annually.

WestWords has developed 63 partnerships. These include three with universities, 23 with schools as well as with the public libraries, organised through WestLit.

Our annual activities include working with over 27,000 young people. We have engage more than 137 published authors and illustrators to work in schools and to run holiday workshops. The outcome of these workshops

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includes 30 published anthologies of student work. For some of these young people this publication will be the only book in their home.

In the words of, *Ali*, aged 15, who participated in workshops at Granville Boys High School, Sydney: *'Working with WestWords changed my life. It's helped me with my confidence. It's helped me with my writing skills, with how I write, with the way I view writing. They basically made me a better person.'*

Emerging writers are supported and nurtured by WestWords. For example, we have worked for six years with Afghani migrant *Zaheda Ghani*. Her first novel **Fig and Pomegranate** has just been published by Hachette and is being sold in bookshops across the country.

WestWords also runs exhibitions including the recent **Cooee Mittagarr**, based on the book of Darug songlines which won the Prime Ministers Award. Despite COVID, in 2020 and 2021 our three touring exhibitions attracted audiences of over 15,500 people.

Every year, for emerging writers, we run masterclasses, mentoring sessions, fellowships, residencies and provide quiet spaces for writing.

We also host adult writers' groups, including the African Literature Development Program and an LGBTQIA community. These groups have published anthologies of their work which are widely shared.

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One of our activities, run for the whole community, has been *The Living Stories Western Sydney Writing Prize*. Prizes are awarded in age groups, beginning with the very young who may have contributed a drawing about their lives, through to older students. This year all the winning entries were published in a book **Living Stories 2022 Things Unsaid**.

These programs contribute to the central mission of WestWords which is to provide pathways and opportunities for the stories of Western Sydney to be celebrated and heard.

Australia has a rich patchwork of different voices, waiting to be heard. WestWords is the only organisation focussed on providing a pathway from children and young people, community writing, to equipping the next generations of Australia's storytellers with the skills and opportunity to tell and share our nation's story. Western Australia has a smaller institution in Fremantle, but this only deals with children's work. We see that WestWords provides a framework that could be adopted nationally by many other regions.

We firmly believe at WestWords that the writing and telling of stories nurtures the development of an individual's identity, which when shared, allows a cohesive community to emerge from the multitude of cultures that are Western Sydney.

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