

# National Cultural Policy Submission

This submission is on behalf of [Westerly Magazine](#), written and offered from Whadjuk Noongar boodjar (Perth, Western Australia).

*Westerly* is one of Australia's oldest continuously published literary magazines, having first been released in 1956. It offers fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry as well as scholarly articles, published by the Westerly Centre at the University of Western Australia. The Magazine provides a Western Australian-based voice within a national remit, engaging broadly with Australian authors, artists and readers. *Westerly* has a strong international reputation, is sold in seventeen countries worldwide, and is listed in some of the world's major cultural indexes. It has been instrumental in the careers of many of Australia's most prominent and internationally renowned writers. It continues to seek to invest in emerging writers and support the development of new careers, playing a central role in the literary ecosystem in Western Australia in particular.

**We are making this submission as:**

- a not-for-profit Arts organisation within the literature sector;
- seated within an education provider;
- our staff are all individually also artists/writers and professionals within the Arts industry;
- our staff are all individually consumers of the Arts.

*Westerly* employs four core staff (Editor, Associate Editor, Web Editor and Admin), and works with an external team of three editors in Prose, Poetry and First Nations Writing. We are supported by the board of the Westerly Centre, and a team of fifteen Editorial Advisors. We employ four freelancers with the production of every issue. Annually, we publish approximately 120 pieces of new work from Australian authors/artists, 7.4% of which was authored by First Nations writers in 2021. Our website averages 3,794 views per month, we have 11,803 followers on social media, and we have an established database of subscribers.

*Westerly* is seated within the School of Humanities, situated in relation to the School's research and community engagement activities. The Magazine engages likewise with teaching outcomes in signalling for students a vocational pathway into the Arts sector. This submission has been written by Dr. Catherine Noske (Editor) and is offered with the approval and support of both Prof. Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, Director of the Westerly Centre, and Prof. Nin Kirkham, Deputy Head of School (Community and Outreach), University of Western Australia.

## **Challenges and Opportunities within National Cultural Policy**

Storytelling, reading and writing is at the heart of Australian culture – more Australians read books on a weekly basis than play sport (see David Throsby et. al., 'Australian Book Readers: Survey Method and Results'). The Australia Council for the Arts' 'Books Alive 2008' reader research study found that almost 7 out of 10 people in Australia read books regularly, and the ABS' 'Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey' found that reading was a favourite activity for 61% of people aged 15 years and over. Literature is also a scene of important cultural work, where vital social narratives and contesting ideas can be negotiated. Diverse literary storytelling, acknowledging in particular the work of First Nation writers, offers us a space as a settler colonial nation to understand our history

and imagine our future. Despite the importance of literature to our society, Australia's cultural infrastructure has been significantly underfunded and under-supported within governmental policy.

## Challenges

### 1) Small Organisations and Precarity in Literature

#### Key Pillars of Reference: **Strong Institutions** and **Reaching the Audience**

As a small organisation (total staffing below 1.0FTE), we are conscious that we sit within a dynamic and diverse ecology of artists/writers, readers, organisations and commercial entities. Realistically, while the Magazine is essential to the development of emerging authors, offering a first publication point for those entering the sector, the reading community surrounding it is not substantial enough as a source of income to support the Magazine. There is a deficit between the value to the sector of small trade organisations like *Westerly* and broader perceptions of the value the writing produced by such organisations (often incorrectly assuming it all to be emerging work and thus less worth of interest). At the same time, the sector tends to underestimate the work required to cultivate audience to support these entities.

*Westerly* has been privileged over the last seven years to receive assistance in project funding from the Western Australian State Government through the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund, and the Australian Federal Government through the Australia Council for the Arts. But this list of sources demonstrates simultaneously something of the administrative and time burden represented in multiple and concurrent applications for project funding on an annual basis. In order to sustain our offerings, we submit up to six applications every year, at a cost of (minimum) 110 hours of labour, with a proportion of this labour necessarily unpaid/unaccounted for within our FTE. The impact of this labour is not simply in consuming time which might otherwise be directed to our core purpose, but simultaneously in increasing fatigue and stress for our staff.

To exacerbate this, success in applications is far from guaranteed. The low rate of success leads to applications which tend to over-commit or introduce new initiatives in the effort to stand out in articulating value. In the context of the Australia Council for the Arts, Literature receives no government-directed investment, and funding to the Arts sector (and specifically it seems for literature) has decreased substantially in the past decade with federal budget cuts. At the same time, the Australia Council's grant structure does not support organisational administration costs within project funding, and larger programs of multi-year funding which do afford such support are well beyond the reach of small organisations.

This combination of factors highlights the precarity faced by small organisations, and in turn by the individuals employed/paid within them – in our case, both editorial staff and the writers we pay. This is felt in turn by these authors, who see the current precarity of funding as having socially devalued the artistic labour of literature (cf. Jennifer Mills, <https://medium.com/@paythewriters/for-a-national-cultural-policy-that-supports-artists-and-writers-as-essential-workers-d738811c3ade>). This precarity also impacts on organisations' capacity to reach broader audiences and diminishes as such the value they impart to community. If small organisations are to be appreciated as an important aspect of the literary ecology, then this precarity needs to be addressed. Multiple literary magazines,

including one of our oldest and most prominent in *Southerly*, have ceased publication or been forced into hiatus over the previous four years. We need the capacity for organisations to plan and budget at a longer term than year-by-year.

#### **Possible Interventions:**

- 1) An **increased, government-directed investment in the literature sector**, regulated through arms-length assessment, ideally with cohesion and interrelation between a state and federal approach, would help to address these issues. Facilitating within this funding the capacity to support organisational administration for small organisations would specifically help support problems of precarity.
- 2) A national cultural policy or framework which understands the **specificity of state-based locatedness** within the diverse ecology of the literature sector, and seeks to support literature within local communities as well as national audiences, **on Country and in context**. This will ensure and facilitate the development of literature across the full ecology of the sector, at grass-roots level as well as national service organisations, and simultaneously support the diversity of voices in publication in engaging with the breadth of Australian populations. It will simultaneously ensure equity in funding, and that the issues faced specifically within states beyond the east coast are not overlooked.
- 3) Increased **market development** (with an end-to-end understanding of the value chain) and audience cultivation to deliver income support to organisations at all levels as well as individual professionals within the literary sector, reducing pressure on funding structures and helping counterbalance the reliance of small organisations on project funding. This could, for instance, involve fostering connections between the Arts and education, developing the secondary sector (especially private schools) as a possible market for literature and writers in engagement.

## **2) COVID Recovery**

Key Pillars of Reference: **The Centrality of the Artist, Reaching the Audience and Strong Institutions**

The impact of COVID on the Arts sector is well documented and recognised, and the various programs looking to mitigate this have been appreciated. But the bulk of that support has seemed to prioritise redressing immediate impact on performance and public engagement. Compounding this, now that schemes like JobKeeper have been withdrawn, the literature sector is left with the dilemma of supporting writers who are not only again vulnerable to wage precarity, but who have had diminished opportunity for career progression over the pandemic period.

Alongside the challenge faced by individuals in this moment, we are cognizant as an organisation of the damage done more broadly. While popular narratives around the pandemic suggest audience for the Arts growing over lockdowns, on the whole, audience and reach has in our experience been diminished. *Westerly's* income has been affected, for instance, by a drop in institutional subscriptions, seeming to be caused by the tertiary sector being so hard-hit by the pandemic. This has put the viability of our publication at risk, and increased pressure on confirming external funding. As above, prominent literary magazines

in the sector have ceased publication in the last four years, losses which signal exactly what is at stake in this moment.

At the same time, this impact of the pandemic within the tertiary sector has highlighted the vulnerability of Arts organisations connected to universities, as many are. Existing within a tertiary institution is no guarantee of an Arts organisation's success or even survival. At the same time, the tertiary sector is vital to Australia's cultural infrastructure – strong institutions mean strong culture. Supporting tertiary institutions in their capacity to engage with the Arts sector will help simultaneously in fostering our literary community (see submission from the Association for the Study of Australian Literature).

Secondarily, a lot of post-COVID programs are leaning on the development of audience across digital forums as a growth area. There has been a steep learning curve in the digital space over this time. But equally, the speed of evolution required to be serviceable digitally, while maintaining and curating an active local audience, creates significant tension. For organisations with a significant place-based remit and an involved local community, digital connection is not an adequate substitute for the direct engagement with audience lost over COVID. Maintaining a regional and far-reaching audience, as we do in Western Australia, has been particularly difficult in these terms, when previously connection with local communities through events and outreach would help sustain engagement longer-term. The isolation of the pandemic and the stress it has placed on time and resources cannot now be counteracted with online engagement alone. Digital engagement with audience needs instead to be developed in concert with extant strategies.

**Possible Interventions:**

- 1) A whole-of-government approach to policy development which recognises that investment in Arts tertiary education crucially impacts on the development of, and training for, the Arts sector more broadly.
- 2) Bespoke post-COVID support for Arts organisations to both develop means of integrating digital forums of audience connectivity and rebuild physical audiences, conscious of the value in particular of local audiences and communities. This would provide means to leverage and capitalise on the gains in digital outreach over the period (rather than substituting one method of engagement for the other).

**Opportunities**

**1) Connecting Arts and Cultural Policy with Education Policy**

Key Pillars of Reference: **First Nations first** and **Strong Institutions**

The publication of First Nations-authored content in *Westerly* is supported by an Editorship for First Nations Writing, held by a First Nations practitioner. This structure in our staffing exists to ensure that there is a self-determined and autonomous space in the publication for First Nations authors to develop and release new work. Mentoring and development work with authors is common in this space, an opportunity to support growth and capacity-building which we have previously extended through programs like the *Westerly* First Nations Writers Circles.

A whole-of-government approach leading to better connections between Arts and Cultural policy and Education policy might provide the opportunity for work like this in First Nations literature to be experienced and appreciated more broadly, as well as encouraging the recognition of the value and power of First Nations contemporary art and culture in the next generation of Australians, as sought in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Opportunities for such connection are straight-forward, but not currently supported in any structured terms. Setting up pathways for government-supported literary residencies in state schools, supporting increased engagement between sector organisations and school libraries, and facilitating further education for Arts teachers through sector engagement would all offer benefit in these terms. Connections with broader educational providers – including TAFE and youth organisations – are likewise generally lacking and could similarly be leveraged. Working from the opposite direction, for the last six years, *Westerly* has undertaken a program of Work-Integrated Learning, offering university students the opportunity to experience an internship within our organisation as a component of course credit and learning. Expanding this structure into the secondary sector to enable work experience would prime our next generation for better valuing the sector and gaining in doing so a richer appreciation of the vocational possibilities it offers.

## 2) National Reading Campaign

Key Pillar of Reference: **A Place for Every Story**

As it stands, it is basically impossible for the majority of writers to make a living out of their practice. Wages for authors are scant and irregular. At the same time, authors are the foundation of the sector, and supporting vibrant and diverse writing demands supporting the individuals who are most vulnerable to financial precarity.

The cultivation of audience is a key step in addressing this. Sector organisations working to cultivate audience are limited by capacity, and reach tends to be reduced to a population already literate and engaged in the Arts. A national reading campaign would be a first step in more wholistically extending audience, while simultaneously offering benefit in increasing awareness of literacy and cultural education. Again, this is an opportunity to institute a whole-of-government response to an identifiable need within the sector.

### Consultation

We are willing for our statement to be published on the website, with full attribution.

We are also willing to engage on further consultation on any of the points raised within this submission. For this purpose, please contact Catherine Noske (Editor) at [westerly@uwa.edu.au](mailto:westerly@uwa.edu.au) or via [REDACTED].