

# Conversations to create change

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## Strategic plan 2021 - 2024

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The Wheeler Centre  
Books Writing Ideas

CREATIVE VICTORIA



Melbourne  
City of  
Literature



CITY OF  
MELBOURNE

# INTRODUCTION

The Wheeler Centre exists 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, without fear or favour. It is dedicated to creative collaboration, community engagement, diversity, and innovation.

A decade into its life, the Wheeler Centre is firmly established at the heart of Victoria's rich cultural life and Melbourne's status as a vibrant UNESCO City of Literature.

We engage with all topics, and all speakers. Nothing or no one is out of bounds, or too popular, or too partisan. Our community acknowledges this and as such, The Wheeler Centre has become a trusted, independent voice for the sharing of big ideas.

Engaging, entertaining and always challenging our audiences, the Wheeler Centre is proudly and widely known as Melbourne's home for vibrant conversation.

**The Conversations to Create Change 2021 – 2024 Strategic Plan** represents an exciting next chapter for Melbourne's iconic Wheeler Centre. Casting our eyes wider to be more outwardly focused, we pledge to be more expansive, collaborative, and innovative.

The next four years will enhance and diversify the Centre's engagement with the people of Victoria through meaningful partnerships and exciting cross-cultural collaborations. We will seek fresh perspectives and develop new audiences. We will also nurture public recognition of the Centre's unique contribution to the cultural, social, and economic life of the state, and grow awareness of our support for writers, readers, and the Australian literary sector.

Our vision is to *inspire curiosity, connection and engagement through the transformative power of storytelling.*

We endeavor to be more adventurous in our work and in our outlook. We commit to encouraging a culture of experimentation and fresh thinking across the organisation.

We take seriously the responsibility of being a trusted source of ideas and conversation in a world where information and concepts are often disputed, and facts misrepresented.

The new strategy is framed around guiding principles that:

1. Focus on people
2. Build a culture that listens
3. Welcome innovative storytelling
4. Expand the reach of TWC's activities to suburban, regional, interstate and international audiences across both live and digital platforms
5. Create engaging conversations to inspire all people
6. Excite diverse audiences
7. Provide a framework for bold, collaborative, and inclusive activities.

We are laser-focused in attracting and retaining the next generation of readers and writers for whom engagement with new ideas and ways of thinking will become a lifelong passion.

A series of initiatives are underway, based around reaching out, listening, and welcoming a wide range of audiences, artists, and collaborators. We embrace an entrepreneurial spirit that builds lasting relationships with the wider literary and ideas communities.

We have an exciting opportunity to hold dear those elements of our organisation supporters respect and expect, while also charting new directions for broader and more authentic reciprocal engagement with audiences and communities.

We have ambitious targets and success measures against which we will hold ourselves accountable over the next four years. We look forward to working with a committed team to ensure the Wheeler Centre's activities make a vibrant and lasting contribution to a more civil and democratic society.

**Susan Oliver AM**  
Chair

**Caro Llewellyn**  
Chief Executive Officer

The Wheeler Centre acknowledges the Woi Wurrung (Wurundjeri) and Boonwurrung peoples of the eastern Kulin Nations, traditional owners of the land where we live and work. We also recognise First Peoples' language groups and communities across Victoria, Australia, and the world.

# Our role is to excite, challenge and entertain, and to amplify public conversations and debates that create change

## CONTEXT

The Wheeler Centre's creation in 2009 provided the centerpiece for Melbourne's exciting bid to become the second UNESCO City of Literature in the world. The Centre acted as a catalyst to bring together a group of literary and ideas-based organisations to form a literary hub, share resources, and generate a unique opportunity for collaboration and advocacy across the sector.

The Victorian Government's commitment to strengthen the state's passion for books, writing and ideas was supported by the generous endowment from Maureen and Tony Wheeler AO. This partnership laid the foundations for a unique organisation. Over the past decade, the Wheeler Centre has matured to become a respected and trusted voice in the cultural life of Victoria and beyond.

With the explosion of social media and online publishing, as well as the extraordinary growth in the popularity of writers' festivals and bookshop events, the cultural landscape has changed significantly since the Centre's inception.

The avenues through which people engage with books, writing and ideas have become more complex as access to, and delivery of, information has quickly evolved.

The boundaries between fact and fiction have blurred, creating challenges for organisations seeking to promote informed conversation and engaged listening.

Avenues and platforms available for artistic expression have enabled writers and performers to reach beyond mainstream media, institutions, and organisations in pursuit of their craft and audiences.

The disruption of Covid-19 in 2020 has turned the sector's attention to digitally delivering engaging and vibrant programs and events. Covid-19's impact will be lasting, as we use the pandemic's positive outcomes and lessons to inform changes in our work practices and shape our work as we move into an uncertain future.

Collectively, these circumstances provide an opportunity for flexibility and fluidity across every aspect of the Centre's activities. There is more scope and a greater need for developing new and robust frameworks, outlooks, partnerships, and collaborations, to herald in a transformed era of cultural engagement.

A new decade and incoming CEO, as well as the realities of Covid-19, offer the perfect opportunity – in partnership with the Board, staff, and key stakeholders – to reflect on past achievements and review all aspects of the Centre's operations.

These reflections, and the resulting Strategic Plan, will enable the Centre to respond to the enormous opportunities of our next chapter.

## The 2021 – 2024 Strategy

**Conversations to Create Change** comes at an important turning point for the Wheeler Centre, the community, and the sector. The strategy responds to a transformed environment and embraces the opportunity to explore new platforms for content delivery and meaningful, reciprocal communication with audiences.

The Wheeler Centre's 2021 – 2024 Strategy commits to the exploration of fresh approaches to program development and delivery. These new directions will invigorate and enrich conversations and engage with diverse audiences.

This process will require innovative partnerships with collaborators who share the passion to energise debate and spark conversations in a safe environment conducive to reflection and open to change.

The State Government's Creative State strategy reflects a commitment to develop the creative industries. The Centre looks forward to aligning with the Government's refreshed agenda when it is released in 2021. Similarly, support for creativity lies at the heart of the Federal Government's agency, the Australia Council. The Wheeler Centre's ambitions are closely aligned with those of the Council and we look forward to strengthening the bonds with our national cultural funding body.

**Conversations to Create Change** has a local and international focus. With the celebration of Australian narratives and storytellers and the ideas that shape a national identity, the Wheeler Centre's Strategic Plan is complemented by showcasing the best creative minds from around the world.

At its core, the celebration of literature and the power of words is a recognition of the importance of literacy. Literacy is a key to knowledge, agency and self-determination.

A lively literary community is a cornerstone of a confident, robust and resilient civil society.

The Wheeler Centre's role is to amplify the voices of all people, to facilitate public conversation that improves civil engagement, and contribute to better outcomes for the state and its citizens.

A photograph of a man in a grey shirt speaking into a microphone at an event. The scene is dimly lit with warm, orange-toned lighting. In the foreground, a woman is seen from the back, holding up a smartphone to record the speaker. Other audience members are visible in the background, some looking towards the speaker. The overall atmosphere is one of an engaged audience at a presentation or talk.

**VISION:**  
**CONVERSATIONS TO  
CREATE CHANGE**

**To inspire curiosity,  
connection and engagement  
through the transformative  
power of storytelling**

# PURPOSE

**The Wheeler Centre supports and amplifies the many voices that make sense of the world through books, writing and storytelling. The Centre is committed to the discussion of ideas to enhance and strengthen the creative connections we share.**

The Wheeler Centre exists to support writers, readers and thinkers, and deepen public conversation through creative collaboration and community engagement.

The Centre will:

- Cultivate a thriving ideas and storytelling sector that celebrates Melbourne as one of the world's great literary cities.
- Engage with local and international writers, artists, speakers, podcasters, and thinkers who are changing the conversation and deepening our understanding of the complexities of 21st Century life.
- Celebrate the many voices and stories of the world through quality public discussion and entertaining experiences.
- Support and encourage the next generation of storytellers and their role in sustaining a connected and engaged society.
- Create a safe environment in which to discuss ideas.
- Connect readers with writers and audiences with speakers.

# VALUES

**We are committed to:**

## Respect

For each other and for ideas that challenge and excite

## Sustainability

In how we work, our finances, our relationships within the Centre, with the sector, with stakeholders, and with audiences

## Diversity

Across our team, audiences, programmes, and conversations

## Boldness

Sharing inspiring, challenging, and transformative conversations with a spirit of curiosity

## Rigour

Applying discipline and transparency in what we do

## Creativity

Contributing to the Australian literary and cultural landscape in ways that are new, innovative and meaningful

## Excellence

In the quality of our work, people and ideas

# STRATEGIC GOALS

**Over the period of 2021 to 2024, five goals will act as key pillars of the Wheeler Centre's work.**

**Each goal has supporting focus areas strengthened by strategies and success measures to evaluate our performance.**



# BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

## 1.To achieve long-term sustainability through financial independence, transparency and rigour.

We will achieve long-term sustainability through the following focus areas:

- Measures to encourage, support and develop financial independence
- Diversified funding sources
- Strengthened business models and practices

### Strategies

- Build a financial management framework that drives accountability across the organisation with a commitment to results-based decision-making
- Foster a workplace culture that supports creative thinking, encourages risk-taking and experimentation, and delivers bold and relevant experiences to generate box office and philanthropic revenue streams
- Create an endowment and investment policy
- Create an overarching evaluation framework and advocacy plan
- Ensure all staff have clear financial acumen, encourage financial accountability and transparency across the organisation
- Develop and broaden the Centre's independent donors and philanthropic support through innovative engagement opportunities and exciting programming

### Success Measures

- Achieve balanced budget outcome annually, and maintain and build the endowment for future generations without draw-down of endowment funds
- Implement financial performance evaluation monitoring and embed financial accountability across the organisation.
- Model cross-organisational decision-making to determine the Centre's programming priorities. Monitor impact through rigorous programming and box office evaluation
- Secure and maintain a suite of sponsors and partners to support programming through the life of the plan

# ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND PRACTICES

## 2.To achieve workplace satisfaction and support professional growth and fulfillment

We will achieve long-term success by supporting our most important asset – our people – through the following focus areas:

- **Healthy workplace culture**
- **Embed a culture of confidence, accountability, respect and trust, while supporting personal and professional development**
- **Strengthen relationships both internally and externally across the wider sector**

### Strategies

- Model a workplace that is diverse, innovative, rigorous, responsive and inclusive, that demonstrates the Wheeler Centre's values
- Build a human resources framework that supports accountability across the organisation with a commitment to personal and professional development
- Foster a workplace culture that supports creative thinking, encourages risk-taking and experimentation
- Implement the Equity Action Plan and develop a Disability Action Plan and Reconciliation Action Plan
- Create a welcoming and inclusive workspace that reflects and celebrates diversity

### Success Measures

- A workplace environment that reflects diversity across all levels and divisions of the organisation
- A representative and diverse Board of Directors
- Workplace satisfaction increases in successive years, based on staff climate survey results

# MARKETING, COMMUNICATIONS, DIGITAL REACH AND ENGAGEMENT

## 3.To raise awareness of the Wheeler Centre and build the reputation of the Centre's brand

### To increase and expand the Wheeler Centre's long-term audience growth and engagement

We will raise awareness of the Wheeler Centre and build the reputation of the Centre's brand by:

- Refreshing the Wheeler Centre brand to appeal to a larger and more diverse audiences
- Redeveloping wheelercentre.com to ensure the Centre's events, content and core activities are engaging, easily accessible and more inclusive to a larger and more diverse audience

We will increase and expand the Wheeler Centre's long-term audience growth and engagement by;

- Increasing engagement with diverse audiences
- Increasing media and social media impact and engagement amongst identified target markets

#### Strategies

- Developing a comprehensive omni-channel marketing and communications strategy that greatly increases audience reach and engagement with underrepresented communities
- Building trust with diverse audiences (including underrepresented communities) in the Wheeler Centre through the implementation and monitoring of an audience diversification strategy
- Devising and implementing a strategic digital content strategy that increases digital engagement with target audiences and under-represented communities

#### Success Measures

- Substantial growth in diverse attendances to live and digital events each year
- Growth in traffic and engagement with content and events featured on wheelercentre.com
- Growth in engagement of the Wheeler Centre's communications and social media
- Growth in new and underrepresented audience booking, attending and engaging with live and digital events through qualitative and quantitative research findings.

# PROGRAMMES AND ENGAGEMENT

## 4.To deliver bold and strategic programming that creates change

We will achieve greater programming impact through the following focus areas:

- **Embedding community-led and co-curated programming across the Centre's events**
- **Deliver programmes that engage and prioritise First Nations speakers, storytelling and knowledge systems**
- **Deliver programmes that engage and prioritise culturally diverse artists and speakers and other marginalised and underrepresented voices**

### Strategies

- Take leadership in the delivery of contemporary, compelling and relevant experiences inspired by the written and spoken word
- Deliver programs that engage and prioritise First Nations storytelling, cultural diversity and other marginalised and under-represented voices
- Develop a system of dynamic community-led programming through co-creation and co-curation, and foster a workplace culture which supports reciprocal collaborations
- Deliver programs that are agile in presentation and execution and are responsive to current local and international issues
- Enable new modes of interaction for audiences, both in person and online, which evoke curiosity and provide innovative pathways for participation
- Develop and implement channels for the next generation of storytellers and audiences, including a bold educational policy and youth programmes
- Commit to community engagement and accountability and make programming decisions based on audience needs, supported by solid data and evidence using a programming policy framework and input from external programming advisory committee

### Success Measures

- Programming evaluation results will achieve annual increase in approval ratings over the life of the plan
- Successful development and implementation of a Reconciliation Action Plan, and ongoing programming outcomes in partnership with Indigenous communities and artists informed by community priorities
- Increase online-only content and hybrid live and online content annually
- Increase ongoing co-created and co-curated programming for all ages on an annual basis
- Secure dedicated funding for educational and establish a youth advisory committee

# PARTNERSHIPS, POSITIONING AND RELATIONSHIPS

## 5.To develop partnerships and relationships that support the Centre's work and amplify its role in the community

We will strengthen relationships through the following focus areas:

- Promoting the literary sector within the Australian arts ecology
- Building sustainable relationships with co-located literary hub organisations and existing and wider communities

### Strategies

- Contribute to Melbourne's status as a UNESCO City of Literature and take an active role as the overarching hub for the the Centre's resident organisations
- Develop and implement a coordinated strategy to broaden and deepen engagement with audiences in regional and rural Victoria
- Develop and deliver collaborative programmes in partnership with cultural, educational and community-based organisations across the state, to deliver outcomes of mutual benefit
- Develop and deliver an advocacy framework that identifies key messages for the medium-term and capacity to respond to short-term needs of the sector

### Success Measures

- Collaborate with City of Literature office to identify and profile UNESCO-collaborated programming
- Increase in the number of programmes delivered in regional and rural areas
- Over the life of the Plan, build a suite of partnerships to include:
  - aligned cultural institutions
  - educational institutions
  - community-based organisations
- Solidify the Centre's reputation as an advocate and commentator within the writing, publishing and literary communities in Victoria

**We strive to take leadership in the delivery of contemporary, compelling and relevant experiences inspired by the written and spoken word.**



## Alignment with Government priorities

The Wheeler Centre strives to align with **The Victorian Government's Creative State** and policies addressing educational attainment, cultural tourism and regional development. The Victorian Government is currently finalising a refreshed Creative State strategy to be released in the first quarter of 2021.

The Wheeler Centre also aims to align with **The Federal Government, through the Australia Council for the Arts Creativity Connects Us 2019 – 23**. There are multiple points of alignment and connection with the Centre's approach and strategies. The Australia Council has also responded to the disruption of 2020 and is refreshing its plans accordingly.

### Supporting plans and policies

The 2021 – 2024 Strategic Plan is supported by policies and substrategies that are independent from this strategy. These will be developed progressively over the first two years of the Plan and will include:

- A programming framework and programming advisory committee
- An education policy framework and youth advisory committee
- Editorial policy and external reference group
- Endowment and investment policy
- An advocacy plan
- An overarching evaluation framework to measure impact
- A First Nations advisory group
- Implementation of the Centre's Equity Action Plan
- Development of a Disability Action Plan (DAP)
- Development of a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)

### Supporting resident organisations

- Writers Victoria
- Melbourne Writers Festival
- Emerging Writers' Festival
- The Small Press Network
- Express Media
- Australian Poetry
- PEN Melbourne (affiliate)
- The UNESCO City of Literature Office





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Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas trading as  
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